THE INCREASING STANDARDIZATION OF CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION IN TWO CENTRAL-IOWA ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS AND ITS EFFECT ON TEACHER AUTONOMY AND CREATIVITY

by

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The Increasing Standardization of Curriculum and Instruction in Two Central-Iowa Metro Elementary Schools and Its Effect on Teacher Autonomy and Creativity

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This qualitative, phenomenographical study investigated the increasing standardization of curriculum and instruction and its affect on teacher autonomy and creativity. Surveys completed by 18 kindergarten through 5th grade teachers, from one central-Iowa, metro-district provided initial data. A small focus group conducted in a neighboring metro-district provided additional data. Coding and analyzing survey data and the focus group transcription, coupled with documentation reviews from both districts were performed and findings discovered. The two districts' varied approaches to implementation of curriculum and instruction resulted in teachers' differing opinions regarding daily teaching, how standards and standardization affected them, and their ability to teach within their own personal teaching philosophy. Results from this study indicated teacher autonomy and the freedom to be creative were adversely affected by increasing standardization of curriculum and instruction. The survey teachers struggled with professionalism, stress, and meeting the needs of the whole child, while the focus group teachers found their opportunities for teacher autonomy and creativity allowed them to teach within their philosophical beliefs and tend to the whole child. Implications and recommendations based on the study's conclusions were suggested.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

From high-ranking national and state government officials, to professors, administrators, teachers, and parents, all possess their own ideology regarding how to best educate our nation's students and thus prime them for prosperity in a global economy. School districts earnestly try to position themselves as holding the prescription for student success and actively market their efforts as reputably distinguishable from other schools. Superintendents and school boards work to differentiate their unique approach in educating children and vie for the recognition of being a progressive district that closes the achievement gap.

Creating "world-class" schools has become the customary mantra for an endless number of districts and states around the world, including Iowa. Former Iowa Department of Education Director, Judy Jeffrey, offered "world-class schools" as an obtainable goal for the state (www.iptv.org/iowajournal). While the definition of "world-class" varies among scholars, the state's campaign to produce these students has changed the way Iowa schools conduct business.

Iowa History

Since 2007 Iowa's educational system has experienced a restructuring revolution. In four years Iowa has metamorphosed from employing local control to developing state standards, and as of July 29, 2010, adopting national standards, otherwise referred to as the Common Core.

In the past, Iowa has demonstrated its educational independence in a variety of ways; Iowa's determination of maintaining local control was nationally recognized while other states began to operate under uniform, state standards (www.iowa.gov/educate).

Yet over the years, with increasing pressure in the form of federal funding, Iowa's approach to education has shifted. In 2007, Iowa was one of the last states to sign on for state standards and testing programs. These reading, mathematics, and science standards were written to "guide the learning of students from the date of school entrance until high school graduation" (www.education.com/Iowa). The Iowa Core, or state standards, not only represented a statewide effort to ensure comprehensive learning for K-12 students, but also directly corresponded to statewide tests (www.iowa.gov/educate).

The recently established Common Core State Standards, a national standards framework led by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practice (NGA Center), provided direction and a common understanding of what all American children should learn (www.corestandards.org). The Common Core was publically presented in March 2010, and Iowa swiftly and officially adopted the Common Core on July 29, 2010 (www.iowa.gov/educate).

These principled intentions have relegated Iowa public school districts from employing local autonomy to aligning curriculum to meet the mandates of the nationally adopted Common Core. Investigating the relevancy of the standards was not the purpose of this study, rather the increasing standardization of the school day warranted interest.

Statement of the Problem

While daily schedules and allocated curriculum minutes are drafted at the central office, purchased curricula complete with pacing and assessment guides, prescribe the how, what, and when of teaching. A narrowed curriculum, coupled with a one-dimensional focus on assessment, and student achievement have changed the way Iowa schools conduct business.

Over the past 20 years, my journey as an elementary teacher and school counselor has created a tapestry of experiences. My professional freedom regarding what to teach and how to teach has moved across a continuum from unhindered autonomy to regulated and district-paced. As a beginning teacher, I crafted my daily schedule and had the freedom to select and develop reading and content curriculum. The curriculum delivery and pace were left to my discretion; it did not reside with the curriculum director at the central office or with packaged curriculum guides. Over the years, experiencing the increasing restriction upon my personal ability to select what to teach, when to teach, and how to teach has brought me to this topic. The limited ability to choose evoked my curiosity, and I questioned if others felt the same or if perhaps these structures and frameworks are welcomed changes.

It is hoped this qualitative study will illuminate how the standardized day has touched teachers' professional lives and personal wellbeing. It is also hoped this study will garner sincere interest from district and government officials regarding the condition of the teacher. Additionally, it is wished that district officials will consider the effects of our increasingly standardized educational system and work collaboratively with teachers and other high-ranking officials to ensure continued professional and personal support. Most importantly, it is hoped teachers can utilize these findings to strengthen and advocate for their own professional lives.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to add to the understanding of how the standardizing of our school day affects teachers' autonomy and creativity. This study questioned how the increasing standardization of curriculum and instruction affects teachers' autonomy

and creativity in the classroom. The quest for higher student achievement drives our educational system and has precipitated a one-dimensional focus on test scores. As legislators, outside experts, and curriculum companies sculpt the school day, the autonomy of the teacher must not be forgotten.

With any type of reform, gains in one area translate to fewer yields in another. In 2007, the Center on Education Policy (CEP) completed a study with 350 nationally representative school districts. CEP discovered the majority of these districts, in order to make time for "additional curriculum and instructional time in reading and math – the two subjects tested for accountability under No Child Left Behind [NCLB], are spending less time in other subjects that are not the focus of federal accountability" (CEP, July 25, 2007).

NCLB, with its focus on reading and math, has led to 40% of America's public schools cutting back on the teaching of fine arts, history, civics, and social studies (Ferguson, 2007). Cawelti (2006), citing a Rose and Gallup study, reported 75% of teacher respondents to a Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll spent the majority of their time teaching reading and math thus, leaving sparse time for other subjects such as history, music, and art.

It is not only a time factor, but a curriculum issue as well. The previously cited CEP (July 25, 2007) study found 84% of the 350 districts reported they had altered their elementary reading curriculum "somewhat" or "to a great extent" to focus more upon the tested content. The same answers applied to math, as 81% of the 350 districts reported modifying the elementary math curriculum to more closely match the state tests. Hess and Brigham's (2000, p. 15) study reported schools in Ohio and Texas had a "substantial

part of the curriculum revolving around test preparation," and their programs for the arts, vocational education, and physical education had been severely limited.

In a 2004 study of 376 New Jersey elementary and secondary teachers, Centolanza (2004) revealed teachers were feeling the effects. These teachers reported they were inclined to teach to the test, believed they overlooked students' needs due to the rigorous focus on high-stakes testing, had little time to teach creatively, and became bored with practice problems as they prepared for standardized testing.

The combination of narrowed curriculum and standardized testing has created a prescription of homogenous rigidity. In many cases, what is taught and how it is taught are no longer a teacher decision. Many school leaders are acutely aware of the narrowing of curriculum and continue to standardize the school day to comply and align with district policies and procedures and to avoid being labeled as "failing" or jeopardize federal funding (Cawelti, 2006, p. 65).

Research Prompts: Questions and Statements

This qualitative study employed a naturalistic inquiry approach, which relied on the research design of phenomenography. This approach explored the varying ways the participants experienced, perceived, and constructed their own unique realities (Marton, 1994). This phenomenographical study addressed the implementation of standards and the resulting standardization of schools and how this structure affected classroom teachers' autonomy and creativity. This method lent an opportunity to explore the various constructed realities of educators and helped cultivate a rich description of their world.

The following prompts were posed:

1. Describe the importance of teacher autonomy and creativity in regard to your daily teaching.
2. How have the standards and the core curriculum benefited you and your students? How have they limited you and your students?
3. Explain how standardization has affected and changed your teaching. How do you feel about this?
4. Who developed or built your daily schedule? What was your amount of input in this process?
5. Does your current reality of teaching align with your personal philosophy of teaching? Explain.

Limitations of the Study

Keeping researcher bias or subjectivity out of a qualitative study can prove challenging. Thus the on-going practice of reflexivity or critical self-awareness assisted in focusing upon the ultimate goal of the study to add knowledge to the field, not to act judgmentally (Bogden & Biklen, 2007). Genuine efforts were made to bracket out the researcher's personal experiences and feelings regarding the study to look at the research from an undeveloped perspective (Creswell, 2007).

This study was designed for maximum internal validity, yet external validity, or the generalization of the study, was not the goal. The focus remained on documenting individual perspectives and synthesizing them versus discovering a universalistic finding that could be generalized across situations (Johnson, 1997). Data for this study were obtained from two central Iowa metro elementary schools, located in neighboring

districts. Limitations of this study included the number of teachers who volunteered for the focus group and chose to respond to the survey. One of the districts is this researcher's home district. Because participant bias may exist, every precaution was taken to limit this possibility.

Definition of Terms

Standardization is defined in the dictionary as, "to cause to conform to a standard" (www.merriam-webster.com). Pinpointing the definition of educational standardization proved more daunting. Many respected educators, such as Meier (2002), Ravitch (2010), Wagner (2008), Zhao (2009), and Kohn (2010), have authored articles and books, discussing standardization. Yet a single definition is not provided. These authors compared educational standardization to "uniformity, conformity, specificity" (www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2010/01/14/17kohn-comm.h29.html). Teaching becomes a "one-size-fits-all," where the emphasis is on the test. Standardized textbooks are now considered expert and must be followed, restricting the teacher's ability to think for her/himself (Meier, 2002).

This study referred to standardization as the increasing conformity to district mandates and state standards, curriculum sequencing, and pacing.

Standards, referred to as the skills and knowledge that students should possess at specific grade levels, and are utilized from preschool through twelfth grade.

For the purpose of this study, teacher autonomy referred to ideas of professional freedom and self-directed professional development (Benson, 2001, p. 174). Little explained, but does not define teacher autonomy, when he states "...successful teachers have always been autonomous in the sense of having a strong sense of personal

responsibility for their teaching, exercising via continuous reflection and analysis the highest possible degree of affective and cognitive control of the teaching process, and exploiting the freedom that this confers" (Little, 1995, p. 179).

Creativity was defined as the ability to invent, experiment, grow, take risks, make mistakes, and have fun (www.thinkexist.com/maryloucook), paired with Sir Ken Robinson's three principles of seeing, thinking, and producing something of value (Scanlon, 2006).

Organization of This Study

This study spans five chapters. Chapter 1 includes an introduction to the topic, the problem, and purpose of the study. A literature review, encompassing current and valid articles, journals, and books, comprises Chapter 2. Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology. The research findings and the discussion of the findings are presented in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 provides the conclusions, implications, and future recommendations.

CHAPTER 2. STANDARDS BASED EDUCATION

AN HISTORICAL VIEW

Our educational system has endured many paradigm shifts over the past decades and the process of bettering our schools for our children continues to ignite passionate debates. Historically, the quest for well-educated children has vacillated between traditional teaching the basics education, and a more progressive, independent, individualistic approach. Yet, since the 1980s, the proclivity towards a standards-based education approach has gained momentum from a myriad of educators and politicians.

The 1980s release of *A Nation at Risk,* a two-year study from the National Commission of Excellence in Education, proclaimed our education was, "being eroded by the rising tide of mediocrity" and other nations were "surpassing our educational attainments" (*A Nation at Risk,* 1983, p. 1). The report stated educators worried about the emphasis on reading and math. The lack of focus on problem-solving and analysis, combined with the limited exposure to the humanities and the fine arts, was also noted in the study. *A Nation at Risk* concluded the curriculum had been "homogenized and diluted" (p. 1) to the point of no identifiable purpose. The "curricular smorgasbord, combined with extensive student choice" (p. 1) perpetuated the languishing of our educational system.

The study presented recommendations, with two of particular interest to this research: 1) schools should adopt more "rigorous and measurable standards" and 2) expectations. The team also noted that "significantly more time be devoted to learning the New Basics" (*A Nation at Risk,* 1983, p. 4), which included English, mathematics, science, social studies, and computer science, and instruction in effective study and work

skills in the early grades. This shift emphasized a change from minimum requirements to higher standards.

The National Standards Evolution

As the standards campaign gathered momentum, the National Council on Education Standards and Testing (NCEST) was established in 1991 to investigate the feasibility of national standards and how to assess these standards. Within a year the Council recommended national standards be drafted with support from the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM). Together these organizations began to create rigorous academic standards for all grade levels.

The unprecedented push for national standards launched many attempts from other independent organizations to quickly develop their own standards. The National Science Teachers Association and the American Association for the Advancement of Science collaborated to design their own standards in science. Following close behind were educators from the fields of civics, language arts, fine arts, history and social studies.

Consequently, many states began to recognize the increasing prerogative of the federal government and, as such, began to align their practices with the national standards effort. Notably, one state dissented and did not relinquish its freedom to create state and district standards: Iowa (www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks).

In 1994, Iowa educators watched as President William J. Clinton signed into law the Goals 2000: Educate America Act. This movement established the National Education Standards and Improvement Council (NESIC), which reviewed and certified

voluntary state and national education standards being developed. Both NCEST and the NESIC were targets of severe criticism, as government involvement in education grew.

Many saw the standards as just a new version of old reform efforts. Eisner (1995) compared the standards movement to the efficiency movement by declaring the mechanizing and standardizing of teaching did not work earlier in the century and the standards movement would end with the same results. Along with this, the sheer volume of the standards document proved insurmountable. By 1995, the standards document weighed 14 pounds and counted over 2,000 pages.

Critics also viewed this as yet another obstacle to overcome. Apple, a Professor of Curriculum and Instruction, and Educational Policy Studies from the University of Wisconsin, noted, “National standards and national testing are the first steps toward educational apartheid under the rhetoric of accountability” (as cited in Diegmueller, 1995, p. 56). Sparking the most controversy was the content the standards promoted. Outlining national standards became a partisan issue (Marzano & Kendall, 1997), and pubic schools emerged as a front line for political fodder, thus sparking a deep ideological battle (Sewell, 2005).

Standards Take Hold

This trend of government intervention continued throughout President George W. Bush’s tenure, as his legacy included the passing of No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) on January 8, 2002. This unparalleled law called for educational equality through increased teacher accountability, higher standards, and annual measurement (NCLB, 2002).

Important at this time, Iowa remained the only state not moved toward implementing state standards. It is worthy to note the Iowa Department of Education was cautiously moving forward, but Iowa school districts still experienced flexibility and autonomy in creating their own standards (www.iowa.gov/educate).

NCLB was met with praise and high criticism, and no matter what side of the argument educators were on, schools scrambled to make the appropriate accommodations. Many opponents cried NCLB was an "unfunded mandate," which placed an undue financial burden on the states. Others claimed that NCLB disproportionately penalized schools with diverse populations. Many of the criticisms matched those that NCEST and NESIC received for their work regarding national standards. Yet, many schools were able to systematically change and cited NCLB as the leverage needed to positively change and take action to help failing students and improve teacher accountability (Mathis, 2010).

As President Bush's second term ended, the nation heard newly elected President Barack Obama state a familiar edict on November 4, 2009, "It's time to stop just talking about education reform and start actually doing it. It's time to make education America's national mission" (*Race to the Top*, 2009, p. 1). When Obama signed into the law the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), $4.35 billion were allocated to support the Race to the Top Fund, a competitive grant program among the states to reward education innovation and reform. Attempts to reconstitute the educational system were directly tied to funding from the government.

Two of the four proposed recommendations in Race to the Top included states "adopting standards and assessments that prepare students for the global economy" and

"constructing data systems for measuring student growth which will guide educators teaching" (*Race to the Top*, 2009, p. 2). The prominence of a systematic and nationwide standards-based educational program, directly tied to funding, precluded states that wished to develop their own standards for their students.

Five times throughout the document, emphasis was placed upon states taking a national, systematic approach to reform. Race to the Top rewarded states "that have demonstrated success in raising student achievement and have the best plans to accelerate their reforms in the future" (p. 1). "These States will offer models for others to follow and will spread the best reform ideas across their States, and across the country" (*Race to the Top*, 2009, p. 2).

Recommendations were made for states to work together in a variety of collaborative ways. Adapting longitudinal data systems, "rather than having each state build or continue building such systems independently" (*Race to the Top*, 2009, p. 5) was stressed to ensure commonality among the states. In regards to standards, Race to the Top expected the "…state's participation in a consortium of states that…work jointly to develop and adopt a common set of K-12 standards" (p. 7). Within that consortium, Race to the Top also stipulated that states "…working toward jointly developing and implementing common, high-quality assessments aligned with the consortium's common set of K-12 standards" (p. 8) would receive federal funding. It remains difficult to decipher if the states willingness to participate in Race to Top stemmed from their belief in the proposed reform, or if under funded budgets drove decisions to join the consortium.

From NCLB to Race to the Top, government intervention has increased, while encumbering states' abilities to exercise autonomy; promotion for consistent and prescriptive standards and reform have prevailed. As government mandates increased and were tethered to federal funding, the role of the Iowa teacher changed.

Iowa's State Standards History

Iowa's educational system remained unique throughout the 1990s and into the 21st century. While the Iowa State Department of Education was established "to provide oversight, local schools maintained the authority to set many of the rules and requirements for their own students" (www.iowa.gov/educate). All districts throughout the state carried the responsibility to design curriculum that matched the needs of their students. "Our local school districts all set their own standards. We don't want state standards," stated in 2002, by Corine Hadley, who chaired Iowa's State Board of Education (www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/schools/standards/iowa.html).

Ted Stilwill, director of Iowa Department of Education from 1995-2004, commented on Iowa's resistance to the state standards movement,

> The reason we let school districts set their own curriculum standards is that they are then their standards and they are their expectations for their kids. When people develop their own expectations for their kids, that's a lot more meaningful for them. They will set higher expectations for their kids at a community level than we could ever set at a state level.
>
> (www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/schools/standards/iowa.html)

Iowa's individualistic spirit propelled many organizations, legislators, and educators to resist the press for state standards. Yet, as time went by, Iowa's state

government seemed to leverage more control. The accreditation process for local districts changed and districts were required to submit Annual Progress Reports and Comprehensive School Improvement Plans, among others, to the state. In 1998 Iowa legislators approved the Accountability for Student Learning Act, which mandated data collection and analysis, establishment of school improvement goals, development of standards and benchmarks, assessment of student progress utilizing multiple methods, and called for an increase in public reporting of students' progress (Richardson, 2003). This was a shift from business as usual, and only 25% of Iowa districts adhered to the directive to publish test scores.

In 2006, the Model Core Curriculum Project Lead Team was formed to fulfill the commitment to Iowa Senate File 245, which required the identification of a model core curriculum (Iowa Model Core Curriculum, 2006). The team was charged with ensuring that all Iowa students were exposed to a rigorous and relevant curriculum to prepare them for the changing global economy and provide a framework for Iowa educators to ensure essential concepts were being taught and essential knowledge was being learned (Iowa Model Core Curriculum, 2006).

District autonomy was apparent as these curriculum recommendations were viewed "as guidelines, not mandates for school districts. Each district must determine what should come next to raise the bar for student performance" (Iowa Model Core Curriculum, 2006, p. 4). The report stated the framework "isn't intended as a panacea for curriculum issues in Iowa schools. It must be tailored to fit local needs. Local districts should follow a similar review process to identify the steps most critical to delivering a world-class curriculum" (p.5).

In April 2008, Iowa Governor Chet Culver signed into law the Iowa Core Curriculum, which identified essential skills and concepts that kindergarten through high school students were to learn in literacy, math, science, social studies, and 21st century skills. This law required implementation by all Iowa school districts by 2014-2015 (www.iowa.gov/educate).

A little over two years later on July 29, 2010, the Iowa State Board of Education adopted the Common Core State Standards as part of the Iowa Core. This initiative was a voluntary, state-led effort by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, to develop common expectations among the states for what students should learn from kindergarten through high school, in the areas of language arts and math (www.iowa.gov/educate).

Although the federal government was not involved in the development of the Common Core standards, "the Obama administration has pressured states to adopt them by stating that federal Title I aid will be withheld from states that do not adopt the standards" and "states that adopt the standards have a major advantage on their Race to the Top applications" (Mathis, 2010, p. 12).

Standardizing School Days

Standards-based reform is about "making change happen" and "raising our sights" (Meier, 2002, p. 120). National standards were established to help prepare children for the global workforce and to provide "appropriate benchmarks for all students, regardless of where they live" (www.corestandards.org). These standards also allowed educators and parents to share a common language regarding what students are expected to learn in every grade (www.corestandards.org). Yet, as our government's role in education

expands and the Common Core guides daily instruction, it is the combination of these standards and high-stakes testing that is standardizing the school day.

Standardization According to Researchers

Standardized teaching has caught the attention of many well-known educators. Wagner (2008), author of *The Global Achievement Gap*, defines standardization as, "the ability to ensure that every teacher's lesson focuses on a particular academic content standard, out of a list that has been developed by academics and curriculum specialists and incorporated into textbooks and promulgated through ongoing professional development sessions for teachers" (pp. 63-64). Ravitch (2010), author of *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, offered systematic school reform to include "public officials and educators establishing a curriculum, setting standards for proficiency in those subjects, basing tests on the curriculum, expecting teachers to teach it, choose matching textbooks, and realign the entire education system around curriculum goals" (p. 32).

In her book, *In Schools We Trust: Creating Communities of Learning in an Era of Testing and Standardization*, Meier (2002) titled Chapter Seven "Standardization versus Standards." In this chapter, Meier proposed, "Wouldn't it make all our jobs easier if we could find a way to get everyone to measure themselves against an absolute standard of what it means to be well educated?" (p. 119). Understanding the complexity of this question, Meier explained the national quest for higher test scores forces educators to subscribe to a scripted day. "This system makes it easier to standardize the textbooks used (ones that conform to the state's frameworks) and the preparatory material to order

(testing companies now have both hard copy and on-line material for virtually every state test), and it simplifies as well the designing of teacher training" (2002, p.129).

In the American Association of School Administrators Journal of Scholarship and Practice (2009) Zhao, author and educator, wrote, "Education in the United States has reached yet another critical milestone on the way toward standardization" (p. 46). Zhao opened his 2009 book, *Catching Up or Leading the Way: American Education in the World of Globalization* (2009), with this excerpt from the first paragraph:

> I realized that what China wants is what America is eager to throw away – an education that respects individual talents, supports divergent thinking, tolerates deviation and encourages creativity; a system in which the government does not dictate what students learn or how teachers teach; and a culture that does not rank or judge the success of a school, a teacher, or a child based on only test scores in a few subjects determined by the government. (p. vi)

The scheduling, sequencing, and pacing of tested subjects has begun to control the agenda of the school day. What is tested, is taught. What is not tested, is not as important, and, as such, teachers focus on reading and math for considerable amounts of time. The opportunity to incorporate meaningful learning does not exist, unless it written in the prepackaged reading or math curriculum (Meier, 2002).

Current Reality for Teachers and Students

In 2007 Robert C. Pianta, lead researcher and Novartis United States Foundation Professor of Education at the University of Virginia Curry School of Education, conducted one of the largest studies of its kind. Pianta's team observed over 2,500 1st, 3rd,

and 5th grade classes in more than 1,000 schools, across 400 middle-class public school districts in the United States. They discovered in all three grades that more than 90% of their time was spent in their seats listening to the teachers; while only 7% of their time was spent in small groups. Fifth grade students spent 60% of their time working on literacy and math skills. Content area subjects, such as science and social studies, were left with 25% of the school day. Problem-solving principles and reasoning skills were overshadowed by basic skills. In fact, basic skills were taught five times more often in 5th grade as the non-assessed content subjects (Wagner, 2008).

Another study conducted in 2007 by the nonpartisan Center on Education Policy (CEP), titled *Choices, Changes, and Challenges: Curriculum and Instruction in the NCLB Era*, was based upon a nationally representative survey of 350 school districts. The study reported 62% of the districts increased their curriculum time for reading and math; the two subjects tested for accountability under NCLB. These districts reported an increase in time of 46% in reading and a 37% increase for math. Approximately 80% of the districts adopted new math curriculum that better aligned to the standards, with hopes of better results on state tests. Consequently, content areas not tested, such as science, social studies, and the fine arts, dramatically lost student contact time or were eliminated from the school curriculum. A staggering 44% of the 350 districts reported cutting one of the content areas. Jack Jennings, CEO of CEP, stated that schools had dramatically cut back on the fine arts and other important content areas and consequently, students are not receiving a broad curriculum (CEP, 2007).

Curiously, "The Goals 2000: Educate America Act 1994, was the first time that the arts were identified as a part of core curriculum in federal policy" (Heilig, 2010, p.

139). Yet, the implementation of NCLB and high-stakes accountability has "legitimized a culture that sacrifices resources and time for arts education in the name of standards" (p. 139). Between 2007 and 2009, middle and elementary students who failed the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) were pulled from their fine arts classes to take part in the TAKS remedial program. Due to the large number of students who participated in this remediation program, it significantly limited the number of middle school bands able to participate in the spring 2009 state band competition (Heilig, 2010). Clearly, the inclusion of the fine arts in the core curriculum has provided little guarantee of its relevancy.

Two Heritage Foundation education policy researchers, Burke and Marshall (2010), wrote, "Centralized standard-setting will likely result in the standardization of mediocrity, not excellence" (www.heritage.org/research). Continuing their warnings, they predicted standards would "force parents and other taxpayers to relinquish one of their most powerful tools for school improvement: control of the academic content, standards, and testing through their state and local policymakers" (www.heritage.org/research). Burke and Marshall concluded standardization of schooling is achieved for the benefit of the policy-makers and bureaucrats who possess the power to provide funding based upon student achievement and alignment to standards, rather than the parents, teachers, and students (www.heritage.org/research).

Standardized Curriculum

It is not just the formula of what is taught, but how we teach that has become a concern. Levin and Marcus (2007) reported standardizing the school day in an effort to improve standardized tests, "has no effect on other outcomes valued by districts, teachers,

parents, or students, such as the development of critical thinking, curiosity, or desire for continued learning" (p. 121). "Teachers have become deliverers of a standard curriculum, geared toward tests, with a pacing schedule designed to finish the material in time for the tests" (Brooks, Libresco, & Plonczak, 2007, p. 749).

As standards guide the content of what to teach, many school districts rely on research-based, packaged curriculum to provide those gains. Fifteen hundred school districts, located across 46 states require teachers to implement *Success for All*, a scripted reading reform program (www.successforall.com). Some districts demand teachers to follow the purported researched-based McGraw-Hill language arts program, *Open Court,* heavily based on phonics instruction and provides very little opportunity for teacher creativity (Moustafa & Land, 2002). Programs, such as *Success for All* and *Open Court* dictate teacher behavior and call for rigid implementation with fidelity to realize academic gains.

Schools that apply such prescriptive approaches can linearly measure progress toward the goal: 100% compliance with the outlined practices combined with 100% implementation of the curricula components equal student achievement (Levin & Marcus, 2007). Both curricula limit the range of teacher practices, specify exact readings, and dictate the pacing and sequence for every teacher. As many worry about the students and how they will fare, we cannot forget teachers and how standardization is affecting their autonomy and creativity.

Theories of Autonomy

In the self-determination theory (SDT), Deci and Ryan (1985) explained "autonomous motivations enable people to realize their authentic self, whereas controlled

motivations are experienced as sources of external or internal pressure" (Roth, Assor, Kanat-Maymom, & Kaplan, 2007, p. 761). The self-determination theory replaced the extrinsic/intrinsic dichotomy with a continuum of autonomous versus controlled motivations (Deci & Ryan, 1985). SDT asserts that autonomous motivation for teaching is positively associated with feelings of personal accomplishment and negatively associated with feelings of exhaustion (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Autonomy-supportive teaching, was found by Ryan and Deci, (2000) to increase the teachers' understanding of the subjects they teach and improve their ability to provide relevant explanations and examples for the value and relevance of these subjects. Ryan and Deci also discovered autonomous teachers explored numerous methods to present these subjects so all students would be engaged. Notably, these teachers were diligent in providing choice for their students (Roth et al., 2007).

Roth et al. (2007) determined that autonomously motivated teachers are fully engaged and view their teaching tasks as interesting and meaningful. Teachers who possess the ability to choose and are autonomously motivated aspire for higher levels of accomplishment and continue to work for the betterment of their teaching (Huberman,1993). The ability to choose is essential to create feelings of autonomy and motivation, and to perpetuate stronger performance outcomes. (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Pink (2009) researched the drive for motivation and wrote, "Autonomous motivation involves behaving with a full sense of volition and choice, whereas controlled motivation involves behaving with the experience of pressure and demand…" (p. 90).

Conversely, perceived job pressures can reduce teachers' autonomous feelings, if they are pressured into teaching in certain ways. Pelletier, Seguin-Levesque, and Legault

(2002) argued, when teachers felt more pressure from their districts and states to comply to curriculum or performance standards, they were less self-determined toward teaching. Similarly, if teachers were told how to teach by their colleagues, they would feel less competent or connected to their colleagues (Taylor, Ntoumanis, & Standage, 2008). All of these situations can lead teachers to feelings of apathy and exhaustion. These feelings of exhaustion have proven a strong negative correlation with a teacher's sense of significance and self-actualization (Roth et al., 2007). These attributes lead to disengagement, which has an adverse effect on a teacher's mastery ability. It is only in moments of true engagement that the journey of personal mastery can begin and this type of engagement requires autonomy.

Pink (2009) wrote in his book, *Drive*, "Human beings have an innate inner drive to be autonomous, self-directed, and connected to one another. And when that drive is liberated, people achieve more and live richer lives" (p. 73). Pink examined several autonomy studies conducted by behavioral scientists which showed "autonomous motivation promotes greater conceptual understanding, better grades, enhanced persistence at school and in sporting activities, higher productivity, less burnout, and greater levels of psychological well being" (p. 90).

Teacher Autonomy

Autonomy in teaching means to have the freedom to reflect on one's values, preferences, and commitments, and have the personal authority to affirm, reject, or amend them (Schnikel, 2010). Schnikel eventually narrowed his definition of teacher autonomy as the ability "to exercise self-control, that is, control over the state one is in" and not to be confused with self-control over one's emotions (p. 105).

Schnikel's study, *Compulsory Autonomy-Promoting Education* (2010), looked at the types of education that may frustrate or limit the development of teacher autonomy, with one example being the "intrusion of the state" (p.98). He conceded that, "autonomy is a matter of degree" (p. 105). Yet, he questioned if most people have a true understanding of their fundamental values and beliefs, and if they can legitimately self-legislate their behavior due to external forces. Schnikel's study aligned with SDT, in that autonomy is measured in degrees and is best placed upon a continuum. More importantly, Schnikel's study strengthened the research that supports autonomy for reasons of improving vision, teacher commitment and engagement.

Pearson and Moomaw (2006) stated, "If teachers are to be empowered and regarded as professionals, then, like other professionals, they must have the freedom to prescribe the best treatment for their students. Experts have defined that freedom as teacher autonomy" (p. 44). Pearson and Moomaw's study consisted of 171, K-12 Florida teachers, originating from three neighboring counties. Pearson and Moomaw's replication of the Teacher Autonomy Scale (TAS) study, originally designed by Pearson and Hall (1993), confirmed teacher autonomy, in regard to curriculum and general autonomy, is represented by a continuum and all teachers reside at different places. What may seem like professional autonomy to one may feel like teacher isolation to another. Yet, too little autonomy, which can be viewed as a lack of control or a sense of powerlessness, leads to tension and stress among teachers (Pearson & Moomaw, 2006).

Pearson and Moomaw's (2006) study examined the *Nation at Risk* document and focused on teacher professionalism as a springboard for the study. They cited Ingersoll and Alsalam's (1997) study, Teacher Professionalism and Teacher Commitment, which

included teacher authority as one of the characteristics used to discriminate for teacher professionalism. Ingersoll and Alsalam defined teacher authority "as the extent to which teachers influence school decisions concerned with key educational issues" (Pearson and Moomaw, 2006, p. 45). Ingersoll and Alsalam went on to state:

> Advocates of increases in faculty influence and increases in teacher autonomy argue that teachers will not only make better informed decisions about educational issues than district or state officials, but that top-down decision making often fails precisely because it lacks the support of those who are responsible for the implementation and success of the decision. (p. 45)

Their findings, consistent with other studies, such as Brunetti's, *Why Do They Teach? A Study of Job Satisfaction* (2001), demonstrated a link between teacher autonomy and motivation, job satisfaction, stress or burnout, professionalism, and empowerment (Pearson & Moomaw, 2006). Aligning with Brunetti's findings, Pearson and Moomaw discovered "autonomy seems to have emerged as a critical factor for teachers to remain committed to the teaching profession" (p. 48).

Teachers with a high degree of autonomy felt confident and competent to make decisions in their instructional practices and believed they had the authority to organize and direct the learning process as deemed necessary (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). Pearson and Moomaw concluded, as curriculum autonomy increased, on-the-job stress for teachers decreased. They also demonstrated in their study, as general teacher autonomy increased, so followed empowerment and professionalism. "A common link

that appears when examining teacher motivation, job satisfaction, stress (burnout), professionalism, and empowerment is teacher autonomy" (p. 37).

The educational system and more pointedly, teachers, are facing an "autonomy dilemma" (Flett & Wallace, 2005, p. 190), due, in part, to current educational reform, which emphasizes standardization and teacher accountability through high-stakes testing. Teachers struggle to maintain a balance between using their professionalism to implement best practice and following administrative mandates for curriculum and assessment. Flett and Wallace's (2005) qualitative study of 70 Australian teachers examined mandated changes, studied how these changes were successfully or unsuccessfully resolved, and noted teacher autonomy as having a direct relationship to the dilemma outcome. Systematic reform forced upon schools resulted in teachers struggling with balancing their pedagogical beliefs against the reality of current classroom instruction. Flett and Wallace noted, "School cultures and curriculum structures are constantly challenged by the demands of school authorities, leading to significant tensions" (p. 189). They concluded education authorities will continue to struggle with successful implementation of curriculum reform, "unless they make an effort to acknowledge and deal with, the autonomy of schools and teachers and to involve them more fully in the reform process" (p. 212).

Flett and Wallace (2005) found administrators and principals had to manage curriculum decisions made by the government, while simultaneously contending with teachers expecting autonomy in the decision-making process. They discovered that school values, such as collaboration and shared decision-making must be upheld, since these values were embedded into the school's culture. "Teachers should be in the

foreground of change but well supported by the principals, who remain in the background" (Flett & Wallace, 2005, p. 209). When schools can successfully maneuver this nuance, they will retain autonomy over the teaching and learning culture.

A 2008 study by Quiocho and Stall, *NCLB and Teacher Satisfaction,* was precipitated by their need to validate the anecdotal information shared with them by their graduate students. Although little has been written regarding teacher autonomy, Quiocho and Stall's findings indicated the level of teacher autonomy had decreased over the past 20 years. Analyzing 56 surveys from teachers enrolled as graduate students at California State University, Quiocho and Stall (2008) concluded the implementation of NCLB limited teacher's autonomy and decision-making. These researchers also suggested the erosion of teacher autonomy and creativity was real and related to the imposition of NCLB (p. 22).

Using a Chicago study conducted in 1999 by Sunderman and Nardini, *Institutional Constraints on School Reform: Lessons from Chicago,* Quiocho and Stall (2008) wrote if the educational reform design lacked teacher autonomy, complete adoption and acceptance of the reform practices were slim. Thus, long-term change was unlikely (Quiocho & Stall, p. 21). Sunderman and Nardini's research aligned with Flett and Wallace's (2005) study, which offered sustaining and maintaining change cannot happen unless teachers feel empowered or have a sense or ownership.

In a related study from the University of Munich, Wolfsmann (2007), conducted research using four international student achievement tests. After analysis of 450,000 student tests from 38 countries (p. 479), Wolfsmann found students performed better in countries with more competition from privately-managed schools and in schools that had

"the freedom to make autonomous process and personnel decisions, where teachers have both freedom and incentives to select appropriate teaching methods" (p. 473).

Wolfsmann employed economic theory to school improvement and stated, "The performance of a system is affected by the incentives that actors face" (p. 474). His study highlighted three features that provide the incentive for school improvement: 1) competition from privately-funded schools, 2) decentralization of responsibilities that provide school autonomy, and 3) centralized exams that provide the public with information to make their own choice regarding schools (Wolfsmann, 2007). Comparisons of international tests found a significant increase in performance from the schools in which teachers had a voice regarding budget allocations, hiring and rewarding teachers, selecting textbooks, and instructional methods. Wolfsmann further found models of centralized and decentralized schools, suggesting that increased autonomy could result in increased efficiency of public schools.

A qualitative study by Martell (2010) focused on 19 staff and 372 students in an urban high school in Colorado. Teachers in this study felt overwhelmed with planning daily lessons based upon state-mandated curriculum, while limiting their scope of instructional strategies to better match the content of state assessments. Martell identified unintended consequences of the accountability reform movement, specifically the narrowing of curriculum and teacher pedagogy. Most disturbing to Martell was teachers' acknowledgement of abandoning their own educational practices to help increase student achievement scores, a slow abandonment of personal pedagogy.

Teachers also shared they were more apt to align with department-created curriculum due to the legitimacy, rather than follow politically, government-driven

curriculum which changed with leadership. Teachers also believed the imposed curriculum framework compromised their professional judgment. Therefore, they were more likely to rely upon their own teacher wisdom regarding how to teach and what was most important to teach (Martell, 2010).

Creativity

"It is a miracle that curiosity survives formal education." ~ Albert Einstein

America continues to push forward and adopt national standards and implement practices that limit teacher control, autonomy, and creativity (Zhao, 2009, p. vii). As globalization continues to redefine the definition of a well-educated person, "creativity, interpreted as both ability and passion to make new things and adapt to new situations, is essential" (Zhao, 2009, p. 151).

Creativity in American Schools

In 1958 Professor E. Paul Torrance studied 400 Minneapolis children who were given a battery of creative tasks. These children, now adults, were part of a longitudinal study. The Torrance Creativity Index proved astoundingly accurate to predict the creative success of the children. What proved more intriguing, was the "correlation to lifetime creative accomplishment was more than three times stronger for childhood creativity than childhood IQ" (Bronson & Merryman, 2010, p. 45).

Professor Kim at the College of William and Mary recently studied 300,000 Torrance scores of children and adults, and discovered creativity scores have demonstrated a steady decline since 1990. Kim professed the scores from our early learners, kindergarten through sixth grade, experienced the most serious decline (Bronson

& Merryman, 2010). When our educational system becomes so focused on test scores, we increase children's anxieties and destroy creativity (www.speedofcreativity.org).

Troman, Jeffrey, and Raggl, in their 2007 study, *Creativity and Performativity Policies in Primary School Cultures*, found schools that implemented a creativity policy positively influenced teacher commitment to change. Creativity initiatives included making learning relevant, devising activities in which learners take control and ownership, and facilitating learners' innovative opportunities (Troman et al., 2007). When creative opportunities were present, teacher commitment was strongly enhanced. Bound by restrictive standards and standardization, the teachers in this study revered "child-centeredness and stressed the relevance in learning through spontaneously using opportunities to base lessons on the children's interests" (Troman et al., 2007, p. 557).

The ability to infuse creativity into teaching can redefine the role and responsibility a teacher feels for the student. This allowance for creativity strengthens teacher commitment and serves the learner in three ways: (1) provides a creative outlet for teachers to set the tone for learning, (2) relates teaching and learning to the outside world, and (3) nurtures creativity within their students (Fischman, DiBara, & Gardner, 2006).

"The increased standardization required in the classroom and tougher criteria for graduation, still leave teachers to negotiate their understanding of how to serve students' needs with what the local and national governments perceive as solutions to the student achievement problem" (Fischman et al., 2006, p. 395). Determining how to serve these students is driven by the challenge of devising creative means to engage all learners. Teachers require the freedom to be creative (Fischman et al., 2006).

According to Gardner (2007), the creating mind, “puts forth new ideas, poses unfamiliar questions, conjures up fresh ways of thinking, arrives at unexpected answers” (p. 3). He believes that only the creating mind will be able to stay a step ahead of the most proficient computers, and American schools must strive beyond basic requirements if students are to be innovative. Our government mandated, narrowed curriculum will limit our divergent thinkers. “The United States has moved toward uniform curricula, tests, and standards…” (p. 86). Gardner further proposed that teachers should move beyond class requirements and infuse thoughtful questions that would assist in the synthesizing of new information (p. 156).

Creativity Overseas

Many countries have recognized the change in our global society and are actively engaged in radically changing their educational culture. China has recognized that “innovative people cannot come from schools that force students to memorize correct answers on standardized tests or reward students who excel at regurgitating dictated spoon-fed knowledge” (Zhao, 2009, p. vii). In December of 2002, the Chinese Ministry of Education issued a policy to reform assessment and evaluation in elementary and secondary schools. In 2005, China acknowledged problems in their schools that included overemphasis on knowledge acquisition, too many required and uniform classes, overlapping content, and the overemphasis of individual discipline, which greatly limited individuality (http://zhaolearning.com/category/china).

With direction from their highest governing bodies, China has taken great strides to systematically reform their education program. Some of these changes include eradicating the middle school entrance exam, abolishing the power of local governments

from imposing admission rates on schools and using them as a measurement of quality, and allowing elementary and secondary schools to author their own graduation requirements (Zhao, 2009).

Japan has issued its Education Plan for the 21st Century which outlines 3 major objectives for students: (1) enhancing emotional education, (2) realizing a school system that helps children develop their individuality and provides them diverse choices by moving towards a diverse, flexible educational system that encourages individuality and cultivates creativity, and (3) promoting a system in which the school's autonomy is respected through decentralizing educational administration, enhancing local autonomy, and enabling independent self-management at the school level (Iwao, 2000).

Singapore has now included the "explicit teaching of critical and creative thinking skills and a greater emphasis on processes instead of on outcomes when appraising schools" (Zhao, 2009, p. 62). In 2005 the Ministry of Education called for a more diverse curriculum, a focus on learning rather than teaching, and room for more autonomy and creativity in schools and for teachers (Zhao, 2009).

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach was used for this study. This chapter details a brief history of qualitative research, including philosophical assumptions, and addresses the research design of phenomenography. Researching the implementation of standards and the resulting standardization of instruction and how this structure affected classroom teachers' autonomy and creativity, provided an opportunity to explore the various, constructed realities of educators and to develop a rich description of their world. This qualitative study attempted to expand, rather than to confine, an understanding of this phenomenon (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Qualitative Research

"Qualitative research uses a naturalistic approach that seeks to understand phenomena in context-specific settings, such as real world setting [where] the researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon of interest" (Patton, 2002, p. 39). Qualitative research seeks illumination and understanding of the phenomena within the natural context. It is interpretive, as the researcher, using fieldnotes, interviews, conversations, and documents, attempts to explicate the phenomena and the personal rendering endeared to it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Qualitative research does not rely upon statistically-driven or manipulated constructs that allow predictability or generalizable results. Rather, "qualitative methods can be used to obtain the intricate details about phenomena such as feelings, thought processes, and emotions that are difficult to extract or learn about through more conventional research methods" (Strass & Corbin, 1998, p. 167).

In offering a working definition of qualitative research, Creswell (2007) focused more on the process as opposed to the doctrine. The researcher must begin with philosophical assumptions, progress to worldviews, and through a theoretical lens, implement procedures from which a framework for the inquiry approach can be developed.

This researcher's ontological assumptions support the belief that an individual's reality is subjective and based upon unique experiences and interpretations. The qualitative researcher solicited the participants' individual interpretation of reality as accurately as possible. Additionally, the epistemological assumption lead this researcher to conduct the study with as much access to the participants as possible. A qualitative researcher welcomes close involvement and immersion into the research by acknowledging participants' realities are subject to change, and by being present to record and accurately reflect these changes (Patton, 2002). Consequently, the existence of a true reality is incommensurable.

Phenomenography

From the outset of this study, the research design was based upon the qualitative approach of phenomenography. Phenomenography emerged in the 1970s and "is the empirical study of the differing ways in which people experience, perceive, apprehend, understand, and conceptualize various phenomenon and aspects of the world around us" (Marton, 1994, p. 4424). The goal of phenomenography lies in identifying the personal and unique ways in which individuals experience a facet of their environment (Ashworth, 2000, p. 295). This approach embraces the constructionist paradigm and, thus, the

interpretations of the participants' realities are neither correct nor incorrect. It is their constructions that are of value (Austerlitz, 2007, p. 168).

Unlike phenomenology, which studies a groups' shared, lived experience or common phenomena, phenomenography focuses upon how people experience that phenomena. Walker, as cited in Marton and Booth (1997), claimed the aim rests not on finding a singular essence, but interpreting the "variation and the architecture of this variation by different aspects that define the phenomena" (Walker, 1998, p. 25).

Marton and Booth (1997) stated this approach addressed the phenomena that people experience, but more pertinent, it allows for the identification of meaning people assign to it. Since this method supports the way people think regarding their daily experiences, phenomenography has been used extensively in educational research for over two decades (Marton, 1994). Simply phrased by Marton (1994), "Phenomenography makes human experience its research object" (p. 4425).

Participants

In qualitative research, the methodology determines the sampling, and employing phenomenography requires an inquiry into the varied experiences and realities realized by the participants. The participants for this study were selected using purposive sampling techniques, which was a judgmental sampling by the researcher that involved the conscious selection of subjects to include in the study (Crookes & Davis, 1998). In this respect, preferred participants held knowledge and offer varied, lived experiences of interest to this researcher. Importantly, this researcher avoided any presuppositions regarding the nature of the phenomenon or what "certain types" of individuals might say about the phenomenon.

Establishing rapport with the participants and following ethical research guidelines were of utmost importance to this researcher. Understanding the "observer effect," a change in the participants' behavior due to the presence of the researcher could occur, this researcher garnered an understanding of the participants' settings to facilitate a more productive focus group (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 39). All participants received full disclosure regarding the intent of the study and that individual participation would remain anonymous.

The first step for this study involved obtaining permission to conduct research from Drake University's Institutional Review Board (Appendix A). The initial action for gathering data involved mailing out a survey to teachers in a central-Iowa, metro-district. Although the districts and schools for this study have been purposefully selected, the actual survey participants were randomly selected. Forty-two kindergarten through 5th grade general education teachers were asked to complete a five-question survey (Appendix B and C). Surveys were distributed to all eight elementary schools in the district. Faculty names from each building were listed in alphabetical order and every fourth or fifth name was marked to receive a survey, until six or seven names from each building were compiled.

The survey district is located in Polk County, Iowa, and serves over 8,500 PreK-12 students and has earned the title of the fastest growing district in the state of Iowa. The survey district boasts a 97.4% graduation rate; the number one ranking among Iowa's ten largest districts. The district employs 549 certified teachers, all of whom are highly qualified according to the State of Iowa definition. The survey district teachers work with

a 94% white population, a 2% African-American population, a 2% Asian population, and a 2% Hispanic population. The district reported a 10% free and reduced lunch status.

Survey teachers were selected to participate, based upon this researcher's teaching experience in the district. Its national reputation as a progressive and exceptional district offers an intentional curricular program designed to meet the needs of all students, has undergone two major curriculum adoptions in the past three years. Lead21 stands as the reading curriculum and aligns with the Common Core Standards. Everyday Math, used for the survey's district daily math instruction and written by the University of Chicago School Mathematics Project, is currently implemented in over 185,000 classrooms nationwide, equivalent to 3,000,000 students (www.everydaymath.uchicago.edu). Both programs, published by the Wright Group/McGraw-Hill, are highly scripted and as such, are a change from the former reading and math curriculum.

Teachers from a neighboring central-Iowa, metro-district system, were asked to take part in two focus groups. The focus group district, located in central Iowa, cites a total student enrollment of 9,195, with 4,800 of these students served in nine elementary buildings. The focus group district employs 653 certified staff and these teachers work with a 24% free and reduced lunch population, and a 24.8% minority population.

Two elementary schools were selected for the focus groups for their knowledge of working in a metro-district that must systematically adhere to state and national mandates, and for their unique and distinct philosophical approaches. The smaller elementary building adopted the Leonard Bernstein Artful Learning Model, an arts-based school improvement model that incorporates art into daily learning and exploration in the classroom. The larger elementary building aligns their practices with the constructivist

process of learning and offered numerous opportunities for students to work with multi-age peer groups and participate in service learning activities.

Since school was in session and scheduling of the focus groups proved challenging, principals were fully apprised of the study and were asked to share with their faculty the opportunity to voluntarily participate in a before school focus group. This researcher anticipated 5-6 teachers from each building would feel compelled to volunteer their thoughts and experiences.

Subsequently, five teachers from the smaller, arts-based school volunteered for the focus group. There were no volunteers at the larger, constructivist-based elementary. Therefore, only one focus group was conducted in this district.

An often-stated aim of phenomenography is to obtain a broad scope of experiences. “Selecting interviewees who seem intuitively likely to have different lifeworlds and, within these, different experiences of the putative research phenomenon, is worthwhile” (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000, p. 302). The survey district’s cohesive approach to education versus the culturally unique approach from the focus group’s artful learning structure provided differing and varied educational perspectives regarding their daily teaching lives.

Instrumentation

An open-ended survey comprised of five prompts was distributed to 42 general education kindergarten through 5th grade classroom teachers. Definitions for autonomy, creativity, standards, and standardization were supplied on a separate page accompanying the survey. The following prompts were posed to the teachers:

1. Describe the importance of teacher autonomy and creativity in regard to your daily teaching.
2. How have the standards and the core curriculum benefited you and your students? How have they limited you and your students?
3. Explain how standardization has affected and changed your teaching. How do you feel about this?
4. Who developed or built your daily schedule? What was your amount of input in this process?
5. Does your current reality of teaching align with your personal philosophy of teaching? Please explain.

Procedures

Information and data were collected in a way to ensure "maximum freedom" for the participant to describe experiences and also "maximum opportunity to reflect" upon the questions posed. It was crucial for the researcher to pose questions and prompts that elicited detailed participant responses, so the unique perspective of the experience became transparent.

The surveys were mailed to the participants via inter-campus mail. Participants were provided a self-addressed stamped envelope to return the survey to the researcher's home to ensure anonymity. Surveys responses were color-coded for prominent themes and these identified themes aided in considering additional questions for the focus group.

The focus group was conducted in an area designated by the school principal. Participating teachers were verbally provided guidelines regarding the focus group process, and signed waivers indicating they were fully briefed regarding the process and

had given their permission for their statements to be used in this dissertation (Appendix D and E). At this time, participants were also informed of member checking, a process that involved the researcher verifying the participants' statements, prior to publication of the study. Participants were informed that member checking would occur after completion of the first draft of Chapter 4.

Validity and Reliability

"Validity deals with the notion that what you say you have observed is, in fact, what really happened. In the final analysis, validity is always about truth" (Anfara, 2002, p. 30). To strengthen the rigor and the relevancy of the study, this researcher utilized two validity methods, interpretive and descriptive. Interpretive validity positioned the researcher to "accurately portray the meaning attached by participants to what is being studied by the researcher" (Johnson, 1997, p. 162). This facet of research validity required the researcher to exercise empathy, to gain an understanding of the participants' thoughts, feelings, and their own reality, which strengthened the study.

Descriptive validity addressed the factual accuracy of the study and was valuable, since the description itself was the impetus of qualitative research (Johnson, 1997). Incorporating these validity checks in a purposeful manner strengthened the credibility and the defensibility of the study (Johnson, 1997). Creswell claimed validation in qualitative research is a process and a means to assess the accuracy of the findings (Creswell, 2007).

These validity methods not only ensured a valid study, but assisted in delving as deeply as possible into the data to accurately represent the participants and give their voices meaning. It was this researcher's responsibility to meticulously describe and

honestly interpret the participants' conversations. Extracting new meanings to the participants' unique stories hopefully offered a fresh perspective on their educational lives.

Triangulation, a method used for validation, uses multiple and different sources, methods, and theories, which allows the researcher to corroborate evidence and illuminate possible themes. Triangulation stresses the use of numerous methods to collect and analyze data. Focus groups, documents, and surveys provided a variety of ways to gather meaningful data. For this study, building and grade level schedules were collected. Reading and math pacing and sequencing curriculum guides, as well as a list of assessments taken and assessment schedules, were examined. Professional development agendas and schedules also provided triangulation support. Acquiring the district grade-level daily curriculum schedule that identified the minutes allocated per subject was also used. Peer examination, coding and recoding, and repeated observations also promoted dependability (Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

The precise methods of data gathering, analysis, and interpretation must be depicted in an auditable fashion (Krefting, 1989). This process of auditing relies upon "thick" or "dense" descriptions of the research designed to aid in the replication of the study. Guba and Lincoln (1985) also asserted the employment of the researcher practicing reflexivity and creating an audit trail (Anfara, 2002). The audit trail for this study included the use of files and handwritten records to record the research methods utilized and all decisions made. These files, including a log of phone calls, emails, appointments, and personal notes, ensured data collection could be accurately traced and verified. The audit trail allowed for possible reconstructions of the study or at a minimum

a cross-check of the data. Ensuring another researcher can follow the "decision trail" implemented by the investigator provided one method of strengthening dependability (Krefting,1989, p. 179).

Reliability and dependability address the question regarding whether another researcher analyzing the same data would arrive at the same conclusions. This question implies the study contains a form of measurement or at the least a measurement procedure. If this were the case, a researcher could logically assume similar results. However, with phenomenography, as with all qualitative studies, the question is not about measurement, but about discovering (Marton, 1994).

Anfara (2002) referenced the importance of rigor and the requirement to "make data and explanatory schemes as public and replicable as possible" (p. 28). The team of Ambert, Adler, Adler, and Detzner (1995) asserted qualitative research should be judged as any other research to make a substantive contribution to empirical knowledge and/or advancing theory. These researchers also noted the very nature of qualitative study allows for the emergence of the unexpected. This transparent and high rigor study gleaned a new perspective and contributed to the understanding of the phenomenon.

Data Analysis

Data analysis, from the phenomenographical view, "…boils down to identifying and grouping expressed ways of experiencing the phenomenon, literally or metaphorically making excerpts from the interviews and putting them into piles" (Marton, 1994, p. 4424). Descriptive and inductive data analysis methods were utilized to facilitate this process. It was important to accurately describe and bring to life the "conversational partnership" (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000, p. 302) that occurred between

the interviewer and participants. Yet, in this phenomenographical study, an additional purpose was to infer and reach conclusions not immediately or overtly presented in the raw data.

Completed surveys were analyzed and coded with the purpose of extracting common themes among the respondents. The themes were categorized into varying constructs and assisted in shaping the focus group prompts for the educators in the focus group (Appendix F).

The focus group conversations were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. From these documents, categories of responses or answers were identified and coded with a number or color. Categories were then sorted by frequency of responses and examined for relevancy to the study. Particular quotes that aided or affirmed the dependability of the study were pulled to help further illustrate the findings. Although this study examined many individual experiences, the individual profile remained valuable to guard against meanings taken out of context and to help solidify internal validity (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000, p. 304).

Findings were presented in a variety of methods. Horizonalization, or selecting germane quotes from the transcriptions, identifying clustered themes, and a rich, textural description to illustrate the participants' experiences were used. Their constructed realities were synthesized to illuminate their experiences and to uncover emergent themes.

Researchers use the term "bracketing" to explain the practice of putting aside their personal opinions and experiences, as much as possible, and approaching the research process with an open mind (Creswell, 2007, p. 59). Researchers must remain open to

individuals' construction of the world and bracketing helped ensure this researcher's views did not overshadow those of the participants. Phenomenography is not about how the participants' varied realities align with the researcher's realities; it is about the "similarities and differences between the ways in which the phenomenon appears to the participants" (Marton, 1994, p. 4428). The phenomenographer pursues multiple connections that participants experience with a phenomenon. Therefore, the aim of the researcher is to collect these varying experiences and understandings and logically characterize them (Marton, 1994, p.4424). Yet, unlike other approaches in qualitative research, the phenomenographer remains neutral, and the focus of a phenomenographical study rests upon the conception of phenomena of the participants, not upon the construction by the researcher (Marton, 1994).

Effective bracketing can present obstacles, as leaving one's presuppositions in the margins can be challenging. Yet, Ashworth and Lucas (2000) argued that attaining empathy during the research process could greatly assist the researcher in the process of bracketing (p. 299). "Empathy requires a detachment from the researcher's lifeworld and an opening up to the lifeworld of the student" (p.299). Employing empathy assures the acceptance of data the researcher might otherwise disregard or marginalize, and allows for "imaginative engagement," which leads the researcher to consider participants' views and claims (p. 299). This perspective recounts stories participants have described about themselves and their experiences, and involves minimum construction or interpretation. The practice of bracketing was employed throughout the process and writing of this study.

CHAPTER 4. ANALYSIS OF DATA

This study addressed the standardization of curriculum and instruction and the resulting consequence on teacher autonomy and creativity in the classroom. The purpose of this study was not to investigate the relevancy of the standards, but rather the increasing standardization of curriculum and instruction. Chapter 4 presents survey results that examined the constructed realities of teachers from a metro-elementary school, relevant to standardization. These survey results assisted in the triangulation of data collected from phase two of the study. Phase two included data collection from a small focus group, conducted in a neighboring district's elementary school. Data analysis from the focus group provided further understanding regarding the concepts of teacher autonomy and creativity, and how the standardizing of curriculum and instruction impact them.

The initial step for gathering data involved a survey, consisting of five, open-ended prompts, designed to solicit responses, mailed to 42, K-5 teachers in a central Iowa metro-district. Surveys were utilized as a triangulation piece, to consider possible additional focus group questions and to strengthen the validity of the focus group data. Phase two, a small focus group and the cornerstone of the study, involved a conversation with five K-5 general education teachers from a neighboring metro-district, working in the same elementary building.

Consistent with phenomenographical research, the prompts posed in both the survey and focus group were open-ended to encourage responses regarding how the phenomenon was experienced. Bowden (2000) explained open-ended questions allowed participants to determine which aspects of the question appeared most relevant to them.

Bowden further stated questions should be diagnostic in design to expose the various ways of understanding the phenomenon within its context (p. 8).

A collection of documents from both metro-districts supported the descriptive validity. Documentation gathered from both districts included elementary curriculum time-allotment schedules, building/grade level schedules, professional development calendars, assessment schedules, and reading and math pacing and sequencing guides. Interpretive validity was strengthened with a member check of the focus group transcript.

Initial Exploratory Investigation

Survey data were first collected from a neighboring metro-district to explore the varying ways the respondents experience, perceive, and construct their own unique realities (Marton, 1994). A purposive, random sampling of individuals for the survey and the focus group helped to offset any researcher bias with regards to participant selection. Random sampling ensured "multiple voices, exhibiting characteristics of similarity, dissimilarity, redundancy, and variety, are sought in order to gain greater knowledge of a wider group" (Shenton, 2005, p. 65). Shenton also underscored the value of site triangulation that involved participation from respondents representing various institutions to lower the effect of specific factors that might influence a single site. Survey results assisted in identifying critical themes and provided a lens from which to craft the focus group questions and prompts. Collecting and analyzing survey data presented an opportunity to employ numerous strategies to strengthen internal validity and reliability of the study as a whole.

An alphabetized list of each of the eight elementary building's K-5 certified, general education teachers was created. All 42, K-5 teachers who received the survey

were Caucasian and two were male. From the 42 surveys sent, 18 were completed, which allowed for a 43.4% return rate.

Reading numerous qualitative studies, articles, and books, that outlined procedures relevant to data collection and analysis specific to phenomenography, provided a framework from which to base the study. Authors such as Guba, Lincoln, Akerlind, and Marton, have been cited throughout this study.

Curriculum directors from both districts were contacted, district documents were reviewed, and elementary building websites were read to build background knowledge regarding the building environment. A colleague from the Iowa Department of Education served as peer reviewer to provide feedback and to "challenge assumptions" (Shenton, 2005, p. 67) made throughout the study.

Survey Analysis

Survey results from the neighboring metro-district, for prompt one, describing teacher autonomy and creativity in regards to your daily teaching, established four categories of description: (1) district protocol, (2) mandated curriculum, (3) professional freedom, and (4) professional discontentment. Out of 53 sentence responses, 39 or 74% of those comments voiced frustration relevant to teacher autonomy and creativity, 12 responses or 23% were positive, and two comments or 3% were neutral in design. Comments included, "I had to sign a sheet a paper that said we would not use our own materials." "I can't describe teacher autonomy. It doesn't exist." "I have to move on if kids don't get it. It's frustrating because all the grade levels must be doing the same thing." These statements were countered with thoughts, "I can be slightly creative with

the delivery of my lesson," and "I feel like I have the flexibility to be creative in my teaching."

Prompt two inquired how the standards and core curriculum benefited the teacher and students and how they limited the teachers and students. Thirty-six statements supported the standards and core curriculum, while 42 statements professed their limiting ability for teachers and students. Five categories of description supported the benefits of the standards: (1) consistency, (2) expectations, (3) guiding framework, (4) helping with teacher preparation, and (5) addressing student needs. Teachers' responses echoed the following examples: "There are clear expectations," "Standards help me reach my end goal," "I know exactly what they (students) are expected to know," and "It provides an opportunity for all students to access appropriate material regardless of the teacher."

Categories of description that defined the limitations of standards, in order of frequency were: (a) lack of student engagement and joy, (b) professionalism concerns, (c) limits or denies teacher autonomy, (d) lack of teacher engagement and joy, (e) production-based learning, (f) volume of standards, and (g) limits or denies creativity. Teachers expressed their concerns by stating: "The sparks and excitement for learning are not there," "We are not valued as people who know something," "There is little time to teach students in a different way if they don't understand a concept."

Prompt three inquired how standardization has affected and changed your teaching. This survey question elicited 75 responses, the most from the survey questions and prompts. Twenty-four or 32% of the responses were worded favorably, while 51 responses or 68% provided negative feedback. The categories of description in order of frequency for the favorable responses, were: (a) clear expectations, (b) ease of teacher

preparation, (c) consistency with teaching, (d) positive affect on student achievement, and (e) positive affect on professional development. Statements to support these categories include: “It has created consistency between our grade levels,” “I have to focus on the use of formative assessments,” “It’s easier because we teach from manuals,” and “Teaching is more explicit, due to explicit lesson presentations and trainings by the district.”

Categories of description, in order of frequency for unfavorable responses, were: (a) teachers losing the joy and fun of teaching, (b) professionalism issues, (c) treadmill effect for students, (d) students losing the joy and authentic opportunities to learn, (e) autonomy issues, (f) creativity issues, and (g) strain on teacher/student relationships. Examples of supporting statements include: “Standardization has taken the passion away from me,” “I feel like we are assessing kids to death so they all can meet the standard,” “We can’t fully differentiate because we are held to the pacing guide,” “You open a manual and teach from it….anyone can do that,” and “Students may be going through a tough time and you don’t even know, because the focus is on the lesson.”

Survey prompt four asked, “Who developed your daily schedule and what was your amount of input into the schedule?” Out of the 18 surveys returned, six indicated their building administrator or central office built their schedule, ten responded the schedule was built in collaboration with their grade level team, but structured around administrator guidelines, and two replied they built their own schedule without guidance from grade-level members or administration. Quotes to support these responses included: “My team had to teach the same subjects at the same time. I would have rather had my schedule a little different but had to conform to my teammates,” “My PLC developed our daily schedule. We had a few restrictions, but worked within the framework,” and “I was

handed my schedule in August and told there would be no adjustments or opportunities for change."

The final survey question, prompt five, elicited teachers' feelings regarding their current teaching reality and if that aligned with their personal teaching philosophy. Out of 18 surveys returned, two teachers responded affirmatively, seven teachers replied their current reality does not align with their personal beliefs, and the remaining nine wrote their reality "somewhat" fits their personal philosophy or they were ambivalent in their response. Categories of description for this prompt, in order of frequency, were: (a) teacher and student stress, (b) not seeing the whole child, (c) curriculum issues, (d) little or no autonomy, (e) little or no creativity, (f) matters of professionalism, and (g) positive student achievement. Statements to support these categories include: "Students are stressed because there is no down-time," "The curriculum is beginning to burn out students with the push for even more academics," "I miss reading and the kids miss reading books from great authors," "I'm a professional and should have more say in regards to how and what I teach," "Teaching is an art created with each class and this can't happen with standardization," "I feel like the district is saying we don't trust you and we know what's best for your children," and "I appreciate the research behind the programs and that helps students learn."

Documents gathered on-line from the survey district to triangulate the data revealed a well-organized and structured educational program. The district assessment schedule, published on a spreadsheet, provides the 2011-2012 dates to administer all district-required assessments that include reading and writing assessments, math assessments, art assessments, Iowa Test of Basic Skills, Cognitive Abilities Test and

Stanford Achievement Tests. The Elementary Curriculum Time Allotments schedule presented the districts 5-day curriculum cycle with 2100 minutes devoted to curriculum, the fine arts, lunch, and recesses. The K-12 Literacy Power Standards and the K-12 Mathematics Power Standards were documents also available on-line.

Provided to teachers on the opening workday of the 2011 school year, several documents outlining district protocol were distributed. These documents include suggested pacing schedules for the reading curriculum, the math curriculum, and the writing curriculum.

Focus Group Participants

The five focus group members, all K-5 general education teachers, were female, and taught in a central Iowa, metro-district, with an elementary population of roughly 4,800 children who attended eight elementary schools. According to the district website, each of these elementary schools offers its own, unique personality, yet the schools all share commonalities such as an emphasis on mastering the basic skills, coordinated K-6 curriculum, strong fine-arts programs, and Spanish language instruction beginning in the early primary years. The school district's mission and vision referenced the importance of inspiring the joy of learning in children and developing lifelong learners who command the skills, knowledge, and creativity to succeed in a changing world.

The focus group participants worked at a Leonard Bernstein model school, an arts-based school improvement model, developed from the philosophy of Leonard Bernstein. In the classrooms, art is the antecedent to all learning and to the curriculum content. The instructional day was organized around the progression of four quadrants, "experience, inquire, create, and reflect," in which master works of art are used to begin

the journey of exploring the curriculum content. The Leonard Bernstein Model stated children will be able to understand and discover their own learning strengths, which becomes the impetus for stronger student engagement in learning. Research has shown that teachers who use the Leonard Bernstein Model feel more connected to their colleagues, students, and school. They also feel a strong motivation and desire to improve their teaching, and enjoy the flexibility the model allows (Griffin & Miyoshi, 2009).

Procedures

The focus group conversation was conducted in the teachers' school building. Permission to conduct research was granted from one of the district's associate superintendents and, subsequently, access to the focus group's building was secured by telephoning the building administrator. It is important to note, an opportunity for a second focus group was offered at another elementary within the same district. The focus group did not materialize, as there were no volunteers.

All K-5 general education teachers at the participating building were notified of the focus group through an informational email, drafted by this researcher, and disseminated by the building administrator. The open invitation detailed the purpose and topic of the focus group, the date and time parameters, and the exhaustive steps to ensure confidentiality. A week before the focus group date, a phone conversation with the building administrator revealed five teachers indicated an interest in participating.

Upon entering the building the morning of the focus group, this researcher immediately noticed the large murals covering one entire wall. Closer examination of the murals revealed hundreds of square tiles; each tile showcased individual student artwork. The colorful collage of two-dimensional and three-dimensional artwork illustrated the

school's beliefs regarding community, character, and creativity. This grand mural embodied the school's values and elicited an unspoken message of welcome to the building. Other walls displayed students' writing and an assortment of schoolwork produced by the children.

The building principal selected the meeting room to ensure privacy. Approximately 500 square feet and located directly across from the large murals hanging at the front of the building, the meeting room was encased by two full walls of sliding doors and windows. The meeting room, utilized by all staff and students, provided space for activities ranging from reading buddies to writing activities, to staff gathering in the room for meetings. Closed slider doors allowed teachers the choice of engaging in a more private and separate activity with their students. When left open, the room was a popular destination for children to read silently, participate in small group activities, or complete other school-related assignments. The prominent working fireplace at the center of the back wall, the numerous pieces of upholstered sofas and comfortable chairs, and endtables with decorative lamps, created an intimate feel to the sizable room.

Before the participating teachers arrived, this researcher arranged a sofa and four overstuffed chairs around a square, wooden coffee table. The circular arrangement provided a comfortable milieu for the discussion. Upon arrival, teachers personally selected their seats for the focus group; two teachers shared a sofa and the remaining three teachers sat in the chairs. Since a 30-minute time frame had been previously agreed upon via email, establishing researcher-participant rapport required swift enrollment. Through personal introductions, an explanation of the purpose and procedures of the focus group, and some light-hearted informal conversation sprinkled into the concise

opening dialogue, an amicable atmosphere was established. To further facilitate an honest discussion, a few minutes were reserved to outline this researcher's commitment to confidentiality, an explanation of member checking, and the participants' understanding and signing of the Letter of Consent form.

After the opening instructions were complete and forms were signed by all, this researcher, in counter-clockwise fashion, assigned the five teachers a number, and set a small index card with their corresponding number on the coffee table in front of each teacher. The conversation was audio-recorded, with teachers identifying themselves by their assigned number before they spoke to protect their identity.

The five, open-ended survey prompts were brought with the anticipation of asking additional follow-up questions. Prompt four, which inquired about the teachers' daily schedule and curriculum time allotments, was not formally posed, as this question was answered throughout the duration of the focus group. The conversation occurred during a morning, 30-minute professional development time allotment and this researcher remained cognizant of the time parameters to honor the teachers' time and their willingness to volunteer. Since the teachers spoke freely, and provided lengthy and detailed responses to the four prompts, no additional time remained for follow-up questions. With approximately three minutes remaining and a slight pause in the conversation, this researcher announced that the time had expired and asked for any additional comments or questions. The member check procedures were reviewed and the members were thanked for their time and involvement. Following some general conversation regarding the end of the school year, the teachers departed.

To ensure research validity, triangulation processes were implemented to enhance the comprehensiveness of data, to contextualize the interpretations, and to explore a variety of similar and dissimilar viewpoints (Rock, 2001). Creswell (2007) contended triangulation is a validation strategy that "involves corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective" (p. 208). Triangulation of the focus group transcript, survey results, and building/district documents were gathered and analyzed. This strategy lessened the possibility of chance associations and systematic biases that "provide a background to help explain the attitudes and behaviors of those in the group under scrutiny, as well as to verify particular details that participants have supplied" (Shenton, 2004, p. 66).

The district's Director of Curriculum provided the elementary schools' assessment timeline. This schedule included approximate dates for administering reading and mathematics assessments, Iowa Test of Basic Skills, writing assessments, and Cognitive Abilities testing. Other documents obtained through the district office included a curriculum time allotment chart, and the 2011-2012 professional development dates and agenda. Information regarding the Leonard Bernstein Artful Learning Model was obtained by connecting to a link provided by the school's website.

Following the focus group, this researcher typed verbatim the transcription of the conversations. Sin (2010) cautioned the risk of interpretation, if the researcher relied solely on the transcripts for analysis. She advised reflection on the interview, immediately following the conversation by writing down mental notes and "relevant contextual features of the interviews" (p. 314). Sin also advocated for repeated listening to the recording, both before and after the transcription. These steps were taken to

strengthen the validity of the study. Participants were emailed the complete transcription, and a member check was conducted. All five participants replied with approval of the transcription.

The precise methods of data gathering, analysis, and interpretation must be depicted in an auditable fashion (Krefting, 1989). An audit trail was created to strengthen the validity and trustworthiness of this study. Documents from the district were labeled with dates and the location of origin. Binders and spiral notebooks with logs of phone calls, copies of emails, appointment dates, and personal notes and thoughts provided a framework from which research decisions were made and protocol enacted.

Finally, much thought was accorded regarding which survey prompts to replicate with the focus group and the crafting of additional focus group questions. Survey prompts were tailored to elicit honest teacher responses that would reveal their thoughts and feelings relevant to the standardization of curriculum and instruction and how it affects teacher autonomy and creativity. The five survey prompts generated detailed responses characterized by philosophical beliefs. Employing triangulation methods, the survey results indicated these five prompts would more than likely produce plenteous and purposive conversation with the focus group participants. As stated earlier, additional prompts were not posed to the focus group, due to time limitations.

Data Analysis

The phenomenographic analysis of data required a manual sorting of concepts construed from the sources of data. This process allowed the researcher to further explore the variation in differences among the inferred concepts. These concepts are grouped to form a minimum number of descriptive categories. Akerlind (2005) described this

process as “a strongly iterative and comparative one, involving the continual sorting and resorting of data, plus ongoing comparisons between the data and the developing categories of description, as well as between the categories themselves” (p. 324). After transcribing and member checking the focus group conversations, data analysis for this study began with typing each question or statement posed to the group at the top of four separate pages. For each of the four statements and questions presented to the focus group, corresponding responses were typed in stated order, and each sentence was assigned a number, thus creating a numbered list of sentences for each prompt. The teachers’ assigned number was typed in parenthesis following their corresponding responses to better track their individual comments and uncover possible themes.

Marton and Pong (2005) explained there exist nominated categories of description by the researcher that articulate an overall meaning of like concepts. These categories of description are developed from repeated sorting and categorizing of data. Reading the list of sentences for a minimum of three times each, themes began to emerge. Using a spiral notebook, category headings were written and the sentence numbers were placed under appropriate headings. Sentence numbers placed under more than one category were circled to indicate duplication. Through further rereading of each individual teacher’s response in its entirety, the teachers’ constructed reality and descriptive meaning emerged and the duplications were eradicated. For example, Teacher 2 offered, “We have a set curriculum, but we have a lot of movement that we can do on a daily basis.” The numbered sentence, in this case, sentence number 3, was first placed under two categories of description, “curriculum” and “autonomy.” After additional readings of Teacher 2’s comments in its entirety, the meaning became transparent with her focus on autonomy

rather than curriculum. This procedure, supported by Green (2005), instructs the researcher to focus on the categories as a whole set, rather than on categories in isolation.

After all sentences were placed under a category of description, the number of responses per category determined the frequency. Ordering the categories in terms of response frequency provided an avenue that (Akerlind, 2005) highlights all the variations in the data, but also demonstrates an internal consistency. For instance, prompt five inquired if teachers' current reality aligned with their teaching philosophy. Six categories of description emerged, yet all categories were inexplicably linked with responses from other various categories supporting the underlying theme.

Prompt One: Describe the importance of teacher autonomy and creativity in regard to your daily teaching.

The definitions of teacher autonomy and creativity were provided during the discussion to limit any misunderstanding of the terms and to ensure an understanding of the two specific constructs.

All teacher responses from focus group prompt one were typed on a word processor document. The five participants offered 27 different responses or concepts regarding teacher autonomy and creativity. The first reading of the responses found 20 responses dealt with autonomy. Responses ranged from, "We have a lot of autonomy at our school," to the more multi-faceted response, "We're told certain times of the day you will have literacy and math block due to special education and the reading specialist supports…but you can play with it." Four responses addressed teacher creativity, such as, "We can fit creativity in there." One response contained both concepts in the answer, and two replies were not directly related to either teacher autonomy or creativity. These

two responses, stated by one teacher, directly referenced curriculum rather than autonomy or creativity: (a) “The curriculum covered is vast,” and (b) “In 5th grade we do try to stay on course.”

Three subsequent rounds of sorting the various concepts led to the emerging categories of description. Since the concept statements were continually read and resorted to ensure validity, three categories of description materialized. Marton and Booth (1997) emphasized that phenomenography deems the similarities and differences as an important function to fully understand the phenomenon being researched. These qualitative differences highlight the uniqueness of each individual’s constructed reality and their perception regarding the phenomenon.

Phenomenography investigates the varied ways people experience the phenomenon, not the phenomenon itself. “Whatever phenomenon or situation people encounter, we can identify a limited number of qualitatively different and logically interrelated ways in which the phenomenon or the situation is experienced and understood” (Marton, 1994, p. 4424). The categories of description express the variations with how the phenomenon is experienced, yet are not value judgments from “better” to “worse” (Åkerlind et al., 2005).

The categories of description are an attempt to clarify the different ways the same aspect of the world has been experienced by a group of people, who are all confident their interpretation is the most reasonable (Åkerlind, 2005). The categories of description developed can never form an exhaustive system for the aspect of the world, but they should be complete for the experiences of the group of participants under consideration at a particular point in time (Marton & Booth, 1997). Marton and Booth’s point underscores

the complexity of qualitative research. Results may not be generalizable, yet the researcher must diligently work to ensure validity and reliability relevant to the participants constructed reality and present an interpretation in an honest and succinct manner.

There are three criteria for judging the quality of the categories of description developed in a phenomenographic study put forward by Marton and Booth (1997): (1) individual categories should illuminate the distinct ways or variations a participant is experiencing the phenomenon; (2) categories must stand in a logical relationship with one another, a relationship that is frequently hierarchical; and (3) a few categories should be crafted as feasible and reasonable, to capture the critical variation in the data.

With careful textual analysis, three categories of description emerged from the first focus group statement: (1) self-determined teacher autonomy, (2) "granted" or "bestowed" teacher autonomy, and (3) factors that limit teacher autonomy. The category of "Self-determined teacher autonomy" developed from noting the use of the word, "I" or "we." These statements, clearly expressed the teachers felt they possessed the autonomy to make classroom decisions. Examples include: (a) "We have the flexibility to make decisions about our lesson plans" and (b) "I can decide if I meet that target in a small group, large group."

The second category "Granted teacher autonomy," materialized as teachers articulated their thoughts with words such as "allowed" and "told." One teacher explained, "I'm allowed to make decisions so the skill is mastered." Although this statement implies she does possess the autonomy to make the decision, her use of the

word “allowed” underscores her belief that ultimately, this autonomy is granted by a higher authority.

The final category, “Limiting factors for teacher autonomy” addressed issues facing these teachers not within their control. The amount of curriculum, the pacing of the curriculum and collaboration were mentioned as constructs that impeded teacher autonomy and creativity. “I’m not mandated by our administrator to keep moving…it’s just the amount of curriculum we need to cover,” illustrates the imbalance between the teacher’s choice to initiate her own curriculum pacing, based on the needs of her class and the expectation to cover all required curriculum.

The 27 responses for prompt one, revealed teachers possessed the self-determination to implement curriculum as they deemed appropriate for their students. Although five statements implied district administrators endowed teacher autonomy and the freedom to be creative, these five statements were presented in a positive light and professed the flexibility in lesson design and presentation. One teacher added, “I have a lot of freedom, as long as you cover it, and get it on the report card.” This statement addressed the underlying demands of the curriculum, but also suggested the teacher has the opportunity to make instructional decisions, based upon her professional judgment.

The remaining 10 responses addressed the constraints or district’s mandates that affect teacher autonomy and creativity. These answers delved into the required curriculum that must be covered and curriculum time allotments, originating from the district office. One teacher offered, “Creativity takes longer.” Pairing this statement with her previous statement of, “I’m not mandated by our administrator to keep moving…it’s just the amount of curriculum we need to cover,” it became clear that time restrictions

prohibit the development of creative lessons and in some instances, creativity is abandoned to cover the mandated curriculum.

It is important to note that of the ten responses indicating an outside force limiting teacher autonomy and creativity, nine responses remained relatively neutral in suggestion. One teacher noted, “In other schools, teachers may be teaching different units, but they have to switch due to materials.” One teacher offered her thoughts relevant to the changes due to the increased demands of curriculum: “So I feel like creativity is diminished by the fact that we need to keep moving.” This comment remained the only negative comment regarding daily teaching and the constructs of teacher autonomy or creativity.

Reviewing the responses of the focus group a final time, the majority of responses substantiated teachers possessed the self-determination to be creative and make autonomous decisions within their own classrooms. Table 1 illustrates this point and a quote from Teacher 2 attests to the overall theme of responses, “We can make it our own.”

The three categories of description and their supporting statements provided an opportunity for each individual response to be considered, and therefore, collectively strengthened the validity of the category. Table 1 illustrates the categories of description and some examples of supporting statements. All statements reflect partial quotes or quotes printed in its entirety.

Table 1

Categories of Description: Describe teacher autonomy and creativity in regards to your daily teaching.

Category	**Description**	**Supporting Statements**
Self-determined teacher autonomy	This category describes teachers' thoughts regarding teacher autonomy and creativity in their daily teaching. Their responses reflect their ability to use their professionalism to make decisions in their classrooms.	*I don't have to keep moving if something needs retaught. *I can fit creativity in my lessons. *We have targets to reach. We can get their anyway we can.
"Granted" teacher autonomy	This category describes teachers' thoughts regarding autonomy as a construct that is bestowed by higher authorities, such as district office.	*Our schedule is not mandated by the district. *I'm allowed to bring in any resource to support the objective of our lesson. *Even though math is scripted, I'm still allowed to change it to fit the needs of my kids.

Table 1 (Continued)

Category	Description	Supporting Statements
Limiting factors for teacher autonomy	This category describes teachers' thoughts regarding autonomy and creativity as constructs that are limited or constrained by factors outside their control.	*I feel like creativity is diminished by the fact that we need to keep moving. *I'm more constricted when we work in collaboration. *The amount of curriculum we need to cover is vast.

Table 2 illustrates the number of statements supporting each category.

Table 2

Number of supporting statements per category of description for Prompt One

Category of description	Number of supporting statements	Number of Respondents
Self-determined teacher autonomy	12	5
"Granted" teacher autonomy	5	3
Limiting factors for teacher autonomy	10	3

Prompt Two: (a) How have the standards and core curriculum benefited you and your students? (b) How have they limited you and your students?

These two questions drew responses indicating teachers are beginning to realize the instrumentality of the standards, their proclivity toward the future alignment of instruction to the standards, and a general sense of caution as they move forward. Teacher

1 stated, “We have a little less ability to go out on our own and do it the way you have been doing it.”

Only 11 responses were given regarding standards and how they have benefited or limited instruction. From the analysis, three categories of description evolved: (1) apprehension of standards, (2) standards drive our instruction, and (3) newness with the standards.

Teacher 2 indicated the adoption of standards added, “a little bit of pressure, I would say.” And although Teacher 5 acknowledged, “We do have district standards,” her opening statement captured the unfamiliarity with the standards, “We haven’t gotten into the core curriculum much yet. We are just now going to district meetings.”

When all the responses were combined, it became apparent these teachers were utilizing the district standards to guide instruction, yet disequilibrium existed between employing the standards and feeling proficient regarding their use, as illustrated below.

Table 3 provides the categories of description and some of the supporting statements. All statements reflect partial quotes or quotes printed in its entirety.

Table 3

Standards and how they benefit or limit instruction

Category	**Description**	**Supporting Statements**
Apprehension of standards	This category describes teachers' views regarding standards and reflects an overall mindfulness of the standards.	*It's nothing we can't handle; it's just that sometimes it doesn't fit. *It feels forced sometimes. *Standards feel random and how they fit with another unit.
Standards drive instruction	This category describes teachers' thinking concerning how standards drive their instruction.	*I'm on the reading committee. We're seeing where there are gaps and seeing where it fits. *We use district standards to drive instruction. *We are looking at the test scores across the district.
Newness with standards	This category illustrates teachers' thoughts regarding their unfamiliarity with the standards.	*Haven't gotten into the core curriculum much yet. *We are just now going to district meetings. *I've attended grade level meetings regarding social studies and the core curriculum.

Prompt Three: Explain how standardization has affected and changed your teaching. How do you feel about this?

The teachers' feelings were identifiable in their unified belief in the Leonard Bernstein Model and their commitment as a team to teach all children in their building was evident. Teacher 1 asserted:

> I think one of the positive things that our school has is that we are an artful learning school, a Leonard Bernstein school, so, because I personally believe that kids learn best by a variety of different methods. I feel like, because of our philosophy at our school and how we work through the arts-based learning strategies that our kids and the way I'm allowed to teach our kids, fits very well with what I believe about how kids learn.

The five participants provided 20 responses divided into three themes: (1) positive responses, (2) neutral responses, and (3) critical responses. Teachers offered four positive remarks regarding standardization. An example from Teacher 1, "We try to standardize things…so we're all headed in the same direction and doing what we think is best for kids." Four neutral statements, or statements of fact, were given such as, "We have our own form of standardization within our school." Twelve responses were worded in a critical or questioning view concerning the standardization of curriculum and instruction. Teacher 4 asked, "We're wondering where we're headed and what it will look like. I'm not sure we know what it's going to look like yet."

Teacher 2 commented, "…our student population isn't necessarily taught the same way that another school's population may be and we know what works for us may

not work for them and what works for another school might not work for us." She went on to explain programmed curriculum, "There was a point in time at this school where I was scared, like when we got the Cars and Stars stuff, that we were going to be heading into direct instruction through some program."

Five categories of description emerged from the three themes: (1) reaching goals/expectations through standardization, (2) worry regarding standardization, (3) standardization limits autonomy, (4) standardization and student needs, and (5) lack of joy for learning.

Teacher 1 provided the only responses for category 1, "Standardization helps reach goals and expectations." She stated, "We've worked really hard in our PLC teams to develop essential outcomes." Later in the conversation, she added, "We use it (standardization) to assess where the kids are at and make decisions."

Category 2, "Worry regarding standardization" was clearly supported by Teacher 3's statement: "It's kind of scary when you see that happen to our school." This statement was followed by Teacher 3's comment, which represents category 3, "Standardization limits autonomy." Teacher 3 shared:

> That puts a lot of pressure on us also. It's just kind of scary when you see that happen to our school. You kind of feel pressured, like you have to. I don't know what I want to say. Like the Cars and Stars…at first we thought, you know, we have to do this because we're told this will help them on ITBS.

Category 4, "Standardization and student need" elicited responses that supported standardization, if only for the benefit of the child. Teacher 1 explained:

> I think that it has enhanced our teaching from the standpoint that it has

> narrowed down what do kids need to know, um, how are we going to get there, and how are we going to know if kids got there, and what are we going to do if they didn't get there? …. That's kind of in our building how we try to standardize and get things so that we're all headed in the same direction and doing what we think is best for kids.

Contrasting this, Teacher 4 defended the unique needs of the students in their building and "what works for another school might not work for us."

Teachers 3 and 4 provided supporting statements for the final category, "Lack of joy in learning." Teacher 4 supplied, "It just feels so forced and not right when you do that. It takes all the fun out of learning." This comment was immediately followed by Teacher 3's comment, "It makes it boring for the kids and you."

Only one teacher provided comments regarding standardization assisting teachers to reach goals and district expectations. Teacher 1 stated, "I would say that we have our own form of standardization within our school. We've worked really hard in our PLC teams to develop essential outcomes…We're all working toward the same goal." This particular category relates to the academic success of the student and is goal-oriented. The remaining categories of description address the teachers' personal reactions to standardization. These categories illustrate their views and their emotional overtones are readily identifiable by use of various phrases, such as "forced," "scared," "scary," and "growing concern." Teachers' strong defense regarding the needs of their students, as illustrated above, added to the weight of this part of the conversation.

Table 4 displays the categories and some of the supporting statements. All statements reflect partial quotes or quotes printed in its entirety.

Table 4

Standardization and its affect on teaching

Category	**Description**	**Supporting Statements**
Reaching goals and expectations	This category describes teachers' thinking regarding standardization and reaching specified goals. Their responses reflect standardization as a leverage for success.	*We're more standardized and working toward the same goal. *It has enhanced our teaching… narrowed down what kids need know, how will we get there, how will we know if kids got there, and what will we do if they didn't get there?
Worry regarding standardization	This category illuminates a shared concern reflecting the worry of standardized curriculum and delivery.	*There was a point in time at this school when I was scared. I thought we were all going to be headed into direct instruction through some program. *There is a growing concern standardization may impact our instruction negatively.
Standardization limits autonomy	This category describes teachers' thinking regarding standardization and how it limits teacher autonomy in the classroom.	*When you buy into certain programs you lock yourself into certain dynamics. *It just feels so forced and not right when you do that.

Table 4 (Continued)

Category	Description	Supporting Statements
Standardization and student need	This category illustrates how standardization limits teacher autonomy and consequently overlooks students' needs.	*Our student population is not taught in the same way that another school's population may be. *We know what is best for our kids and what works for another school may not work for us.
Lack of joy in learning	This category addresses teachers' concerns for students' decrease in enthusiasm for love of learning.	*It (standardization) takes all the fun out of learning. *Makes it boring for the kids and you.

Table 5 depicts the number of supporting statements corresponding to teachers' responses. The table illustrates that while one teacher offered 6 statements expressing favorable feelings toward standardization, 4 different teachers provided 9 responses depicting their apprehension regarding standardization and how standardization limits teacher autonomy in the classroom. Of further interest, the one teacher who commented on the academic benefits of standardization did not offer additional remarks or follow-up to the remaining conversation.

Table 5

Number of supporting statements per category of description for Prompt Three

Category of description	Number of supporting statements	Number of Respondents
Reaching goals and expectations	6	1
Worry regarding standardization	4	2
Standardization limits autonomy	5	2
Standardization and student needs	2	2
Lack of joy in learning	2	2

Prompt Five: Does your current reality of teaching align with your personal philosophy of teaching?

Thirty-five responses were provided and all five teachers agreed they are teaching within the realm of their own philosophy. Comments to support this ranged from Teacher 2's, "Absolutely!" to Teacher 4's view of, "I feel like every child, everyday, gets what they need, whether it be emotional support, educational support of course, or social support." Twenty-seven responses indicated contentment with their teaching and a match with their teaching beliefs. Six comments focused on the accompanying stress of standardization for themselves and the children. The remaining two comments addressed assessments.

This question yielded six categories of description: (1) meeting the needs of the whole child, (2) professionalism enhanced with autonomy, (3) stress from standardization, (4) colleague support, (5) administrative support, and (6) teaching is fun. The categories were reviewed three times to ensure validity and three responses did not

directly answer the question. These responses were: (1) “If I were in elementary school again, I’d want to come to this school,” (2) “I don’t even remember my teachers’ names,” and (3) “The beginning and the end of the year are for literacy assessments.”

All five teachers expressed the importance of meeting the needs of the whole child and conveyed gratitude to their administrator and their school staff for embracing and actively practicing that philosophy. Teachers’ comments varied, but had the whole child centered in their teaching philosophy. “I feel like our kids have experiences that maybe other students in other schools in our district don’t get to have.” “Our kids learn best by a variety of different methods.” “If you looked at their writing or their projects, you would see a side of them that you can’t see on a standardized test.”

The following quote captured the value the teachers placed on teacher autonomy and meeting the learning needs of students:

> This is the kind of school to teach in if you want not to be told what page you need to be on when your administrator walks in the room. It’s about the concepts; it’s about the overall umbrella of about what our students experience and learn. It’s not about can they tell me what year the Constitution was written…It’s kind of cool!

Three teachers spoke of the trust and professionalism they felt at their building and how these principles were bolstered by teacher autonomy. Teacher 5 explained the culture of the building is, “Kind of perfect…I really wanted this job and I was actually offered another job in another district that doesn’t have the population we have, but I knew this is where, what would work, with my personal style and my personality.”

Although stress is a part of any job, two teachers provided six responses addressing stress specific to standardization. Describing the stress that standardized testing creates versus the usual daily routine at her school, Teacher 5 explained,

> They're doing community projects right now; everything is so wonderful. You know, there's a stress level when they take their ITBS, because we got to make sure that we are ready and that everyone does their best…. And so that stress does come down to standardization and luckily, we're fortunate it's not like that all the time.

The next two categories, colleague support and administrator support, revealed respect and appreciation for their building leader and all remaining staff. Teacher 2 expressed, "I feel like we have a lot of support from our administrator to do what we know is best for students." Teacher 5 used the principal's name and stated, "Dr. ___ emphasizes the artful learning."

The last category of description illustrated how one teacher believed the need to have fun is a core value. "To use our arts-based learning strategies where we see they're needed and use things to support student learning that we feel is best…that's what's fun."

Prompt five elicited more responses than any prompt and provided five more responses than prompt one with the 27 responses. The teachers spoke without hesitation, the conversation unfolded without pauses between responses, and teachers displayed a certain amount of animation with their communication.

Their responses expounded dedication to educating the whole child, and not solely concentrating upon academics, which exemplified their relationships with the children as nurturing, and not just academic association. Their personal educational

philosophy directly aligned with the district's vision statement: "…school district will be a caring community of learners that knows and lifts every child. We will inspire joy in learning. Our schools will excel at preparing each student for his or her life journey."

Table 6 provides the categories of description and some supporting statements. All statements reflect partial quotes or quotes printed in its entirety.

Table 6

Categories of description: Does your personal philosophy of teaching align with your current reality of teaching?

Categories	**Description**	**Supporting Statements**
Meeting the needs of the whole child	This category describes teachers' thoughts regarding the importance of meeting children's academic and emotional needs.	*Our philosophy at school and how we work with arts-based learning strategies and the way I'm allowed to teach our kids, fits very well with what I believe about how kids learn. *Kids here get emotional, educational, and social support. *It's about the overall umbrella of about what our students experience and learn.

Table 6 (Continued)

Categories	Description	Supporting Statements
Professionalism enhanced with autonomy	This category illustrates teachers' feelings about professionalism and being trusted due to the amount of teacher autonomy they possess.	*We get lots of freedom to use our arts-based strategies. *We get to support student learning by the way we feel is best. *This is the kind of school to teach in if you want not to be told what page you need to be on when your administrator walks in the room.
Stress induced from standardization	This category details how standardization elicits stress and reflects how teachers remain uneasy regarding standardization and the effects on them and their students.	*Thinking about the stress level and where does the pressure come from…It's from the standardization side of things. *ITBS and stress level and standardization; we're lucky it's not like that all the time. *There's a pressure for good scores and to increase them.

Table 6 (Continued)

Categories	Description	Supporting Statements
Colleague support and school environment	This category identifies teachers' responses asserting their appreciation of their building collegiality and the compassionate school environment that has been created.	*Our school is a team. Nobody is on their own. *We have so many people that support the classroom teacher. *It's our school environment for me personally. It's kind of perfect.
Administrative support	This category describes teachers' thoughts regarding the importance of having administrative support.	*We have lots of support from our administrator to do what we know is best for our students. *Our administrator emphasizes the artful learning model.
Teaching is fun	This category describes teachers' thoughts regarding having fun during the day and the enjoyment of teaching. Their responses reflect that fun is an important component of their philosophy.	*It's fun teaching in this school! *When we're supported to do what we know is best…that's fun! *If I were in elementary school again, I'd want to be at this school!

Table 7 identifies the number of supporting statements and the number of teachers who supplied the responses. All teachers in the focus group maintained the needs of the whole child takes precedence and is the impetus for their personal teaching philosophy. Table 7 confirms every teacher provided a variety of comments, emphasizing the importance of recognizing children's emotional and behavioral needs.

This category, "Meeting the needs of the whole child" and statement one's category regarding "Self determined teacher autonomy" yielded the most supporting statements from the discussion. Both categories yielded twelve responses, with every teacher rendering responses for both of these categories.

Table 7

Number of supporting statements per category of description for Prompt Five.

Category of description	Number of supporting statements	Number of respondents
Meeting the needs of the whole child	12	5
Professionalism enhanced with teacher autonomy	6	3
Stressed induced with standardization	6	2
Colleague support and school environment	4	2
Administrative support	2	2
Teaching is fun	2	1

Summary

Responses for the focus group and surveys for the two districts reflected multiple realities and thus, supported phenomenographical methodology. The categories of description illuminated the various ways in which the participants experienced the phenomenon and supported Sandberg's (1996) writing that an individual or single group may not provide the data necessary to aptly distinguish a concept. As such, the combination of the survey data, combined with the focus group data, enriched the understanding of the constructed realities of the two participant groups, relative to standardization and its affect on teacher autonomy and creativity. This process illuminated the qualitatively different and logically interrelated ways this phenomenon was experienced and understood (Marton, 1994).

CHAPTER 5. SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter provides an overview of the study, a discussion of the findings, and offers conclusions and implications relevant to the research. Recommendations for possible future studies are reviewed, with supporting rationale outlining additional research to inform practice. The final section of the chapter presents a concise summary of the study in its entirety.

Summary of the Study

As our nation crusades to close the global achievement gap, increasing standardization of curricula, scheduling, and assessments offer a tangible and systematic framework. The implementation of standards provides a commonality of expectations and a mechanism for monitoring curriculum implementation. Yet, with conspicuous focus on the quantifiable areas of reading, mathematics, and science, the effect of curriculum and instructional standardization in regard to teacher autonomy and creativity requires attention.

This phenomenographical qualitative study broadened the knowledge base relevant to how teachers experience and view standardization. This study did not investigate the relevancy of standards, the skills, and knowledge that students should possess, but rather the increasing conformity and uniformity of curriculum and instruction, the standardization of the school day. The purpose of phenomenography remains grounded in synthesizing individual perspectives and constructing the minimum number of categories of description to weave an explanatory description of the phenomenon (Johnson, 1997). This study did not seek to uncover universalistic findings.

Phenomenographical methods allowed for the interpretation of nuances among the numerous ways the participants experienced, perceived, apprehended, understood, and conceptualized the phenomenon (Marton, 1994).

Following an extensive literature review, the following research prompts were drafted to further the understanding of standardization and its affect on teacher autonomy and creativity.

1. Describe the importance of teacher autonomy and creativity in regard to your daily teaching.
2. How have the standards and the core curriculum benefited you and your students? How have they limited you and your students?
3. Explain how standardization has affected and changed your teaching.
4. Who developed or built your daily schedule? What was your amount of input in this process?
5. Does your current reality of teaching align with your personal philosophy of teaching? Explain.

Initially, surveys were mailed to 42 K-5 general education teachers, working in eight elementary buildings in a central-Iowa, metro-district. This district serves over 8,500 students and employs approximately 550 certified, K-12 teachers. The district recently adopted new elementary reading and mathematics programs, both scripted in design, and a departure from previously implemented materials.

Responses from the five survey prompts were utilized to determine appropriate focus group questions and craft additional questions. Detailed responses from the survey prompts warranted no changes in the focus group questions. It is important to note

prompt four was not posed during the focus group, as it was answered spontaneously throughout the conversations.

Subsequently, the focus group was conducted with five teachers working in a central-Iowa, metro district with an enrollment of approximately 9,200 students, 650 certified staff, and 40 administrators. The K-5 general education focus group teachers all worked in an elementary building that had adopted the Leonard Bernstein Artful Learning Model, "a school improvement model that stimulates and deepens academic learning through the Arts" (www.leonardbernstein.com/artful_learning.htm). Committed to learning in an "artful" manner, this method promotes "the importance of developing a curriculum consistent with district, state, and national standards and brings master works of art into the classroom to incite the instructional process of experiencing, inquiring, creating, and reflecting" (www.leonardbernstein.com/artful_learning.htm).

This study used the work of Deci and Ryan (1985), who developed the self-determination theory, which provided the foundation to understand the essentiality of teacher autonomy and illustrated when autonomy exists, teachers are diligently engaged. Pearson and Moomaw's (2006) work corroborated the significance of teacher autonomy to educators who are committed and competent. Although research was cited regarding teacher creativity, the volume of research articles regarding teacher autonomy was rich.

Discussion of the Findings

Teacher autonomy and creativity proved to be highly regarded among all focus group participants. Results from prompt one showed professional freedom allowed teachers to make curriculum choices in the best interests of their students. They specifically stated educational goals existed and expectations must be met yet, all five

teachers reported they appreciated and valued their self-determined teacher autonomy within the classroom. Having this self-determined autonomy allowed for professional decisions to be made, based upon the current needs of their students. As expected, the focus group's responses aligned with current research supporting teacher autonomy and the positive association of empowerment, professionalism, and authentic teaching (Pearson & Moomaw, 2006).

The survey respondents supplied statements regarding teacher autonomy that described their professional autonomy being restricted through district protocol and mandated curriculum. Their comments, in regard to adhering to the pacing schedule, offered a stark contrast to the focus groups' ability to reteach or accelerate to meet the needs of their children.

Survey responses indicated teachers were experiencing an "autonomy dilemma" as described by Flett and Wallace (2005, p. 190). Their inability to choose curriculum and, in some instances, instructional methods, had also presented an "acceptance dilemma" as well (Flett & Wallace, 2005, p. 191). Survey teachers either accepted the mandated changes or rejected them. Accepted changes presented stress, due to the incompatibility of the practices with their beliefs. Yet, rejecting the changes could result in discrepancies between district expectations and actual classroom teaching, or a decision to leave the teaching profession. Pearson and Hall (1993) noted a lack of teacher autonomy as a critical component in a teacher's decision to stay or leave the profession.

Familiarity and amount of exposure to the standards and the core curriculum affected the responses to prompt one. Immersion in the standards, as experienced by the survey group, had led to a clearer understanding of the expectations and provided

consistency throughout the district. However, some responses implied standards and the core curriculum limited or restricted their teacher autonomy, creativity, and infringed upon student engagement and the joy of learning.

The focus group's replies indicated their practical experience with the standards and the core curriculum guided their instruction and decision-making. Yet, the benefits or limitations were not easily identifiable. This group had not experienced the intensity of curriculum alignment to the standards or the core curriculum as the survey group had experienced.

Consistent with research, standards do provide common expectations and consistency in learning throughout a district, state, and nation. Yet, it is the subtle slide from standards to standardized curriculum and instruction that must be recognized. Wagner's (2008) research identified this differentiation. Teachers involved in his study had a core curriculum or common purpose, but found their instruction continued to focus on increasing student achievement on state and national standardized test scores. Ravitch (2010) claimed, "What once was the standards movement was replaced by the accountability movement" (p. 16). She added the standards movement, in an effort to improve education, has transformed into a measuring system that requires no experience, just the ability to follow and administer a program. This study illustrated how the adoption of standards can easily be shifted to an implementation of prescribed curriculum and scripted lessons.

Prompt two requested an explanation regarding standardization and how it has affected and changed the teachers' approach to teaching. The survey teachers supported standardization in terms of understanding expectations and consistency with teaching.

The survey teachers' concerns paralleled Levin and Marcus (2007), as they cautioned the use of standardized curriculum to curb valued outcomes, such as critical thinking and curiosity, and stunting the desire for independent learning. Brooks, Libresco, and Plonczak (2007) cited teachers' roles as "deliverers of standard curriculum" that must adhere to a pacing schedule to ensure material completion in time for the tests (p. 749). This researcher discovered the survey respondents were concerned with two overarching issues as they pertained to standardization: (1) their own professional livelihood and (2) the livelihood of their students. It was apparent when either of these issues was compromised, teachers internally struggled with the "acceptance dilemma" (Flett & Wallace, 2005, p. 191).

This researcher found the focus group teachers were apprehensive of a systemized curriculum and how it would affect their students. They acknowledged standardization had helped to focus on what students should learn, but these types of statements alluded more to the adoption of standards versus the standardization of curriculum and instruction. The focus group conceded concerns of limited autonomy, the lack of joy in teaching and learning, and not being able to meet the needs of students based upon their own diagnostic abilities. These concerns matched Cawelti's (2006) findings that the standardizing of curriculum left little time for teachers to be creative and both teachers and students went through the day bored. Most disturbing were Cawelti's findings implicating teacher morale is adversely affected when the curriculum focus was narrowed to increase test scores (p. 65).

Interestingly, both the survey respondents and the focus group participants approached this question with reservations, and viewed the tightening of curriculum and instruction as a consequential matter that would change the essence of their teaching.

The final prompt posed to both groups, inquired how their current reality of teaching aligned with their personal philosophy of teaching. All five teachers of the focus group responded their current reality did align with their teaching philosophy. Boyatzis and McKee (2005) referred to this occurrence as working within their "operating philosophy" (p. 216). Teachers were able to identify the value they placed on professional autonomy and used this value as a filter to determine the merits or demerits of standardization. At this point, these teachers were allowed the professional freedom to determine what worked for their students and what did not.

Responses from the survey group identified nine of the survey teachers were teaching "somewhat" within their personal philosophy, seven were not teaching within their teaching philosophy, and two replied they were teaching within their personal teaching philosophy. Curriculum adoptions and a district effort to streamline the pacing of curriculum allowed little time for teacher reflections. The different approaches to curriculum and instruction in these two districts was striking, and the categories of description from both groups offered insight into the value placed on teaching within an individual's personal philosophy.

"Meeting the needs of the whole child" surfaced as the category of description with the most responses from the focus group. This category not only produced the most responses, but every focus group teacher commented how her current reality in the

classroom aligned and supported her personal philosophy of teaching. Of importance was their description of how their professionalism was enhanced with teacher autonomy.

"Teacher and student stress" compiled the most comments from the survey group, closely followed by the category of description "Not seeing the whole child." Supporting the contradiction between these two groups, Zhao (2009) found the curriculum decentralization movement, combined with other reform efforts have placed stress and restrictions upon teachers and students. He noted the following goals have not been achieved: (a) flexible curriculum, (b) educating the whole child, (c) nurturing of independent thinkers and creative talents, and (d) reducing student stress (p. 96). He referred to a national study by the Ministry of Education, "although many educators seem to have accepted the concept of 'quality education' and some teachers have changed their teaching practices, by and large the focus on the whole child remains only lip service" (pp. 96-97).

Conclusions

This study added understanding to the body of knowledge regarding standardizing the school day and its effect on teachers' autonomy and creativity in the classroom. Results of this study aligned with research cited in Chapter 2.

The importance of teacher autonomy and creativity in regard to daily teaching proved valuable, if not elusive. Educational and social research strongly support the importance of autonomy. Johnsen and Taylor expressed, "Today, most teachers are denied responsibility for the conceptualization of curriculum while being held strictly accountable for its execution" (2002, p. 20). Regardless of the extent to which they

professed professional freedom or confinement, teachers in this study valued autonomy and recognized its power to affect their spirit, commitment, and trust.

The three prompts concerning the benefits and limitations of standards, standardization, and teachers' view regarding their current reality of teaching compared to their personal philosophy have merged in this researcher's mind. Respondents connected these concepts and it became apparent how each concept influenced the others.

Although the focus group approached standards with some unfamiliarity, they viewed them as guides to drive instruction. Standardization, although not as visible in their building, elicited statements of concern regarding autonomy, student needs, and the joy of learning. Responding unanimously, the focus group teachers taught within their personal philosophy and their ability to meet the needs of their students topped the list. This researcher concluded if one of these variables changed, however, the teachers' feelings could also change regarding their work.

The survey teachers expressed high regard for standards, since they guide instruction, create high expectations, and help see the big picture. Standards provide a framework for student learning and expectations; standards do not impose pacing or scripted teaching. The distinction between freedom from a standardized day and addressing content standards remains important. Yet, their comments regarding the limitations of standards would have made sense under the standardization prompt. Comments such as, "I don't feel I can try new ideas or activities," and "The reading curriculum takes away from student reading interest," represented many similar comments and pointed more to restricted autonomy, due to the implementation of required curriculum, pacing schedules and scripted curriculum standardization.

These responses underscored the survey teachers' misalignment of their personal philosophy in regard to their current reality of teaching. Their answers were predictable and associated with their collective responses to standards and standardization. Sixteen teachers out of eighteen responded they were not teaching within their personal philosophy of teaching and, thus, signaled frustration with the stress that standardization has placed on them and their students.

Implications

Despite the two groups' contrasting results, their message is unified. Attention must be given to the condition of the teacher, the student, and an acknowledgment of the practices that contribute to their perceptions of their current reality.

Iowa's adoption of state and national standards transformed the way many districts in Iowa deliver curriculum. Yet, the standards remain a document, an outline of content to be covered. As Wagner (2008) detailed, standards-based education evolved into data-driven teaching, focused upon results from standardized tests, which determine the extent and depth of the required content. He continued the more teachers cover the required content or standards, the better the test scores (p. 64). Enter standardization.

This study showed standardization not only in the form of curriculum delivery, but also in daily schedules, assessment calendars, and pacing guides. All of these tactics were implemented with the primary goal to improve test scores. As standardization becomes routine or accepted, the focus will shift and remain on "how students fare and preparing them to take the test, a prospect that offers scant comfort to those concerned about what is missing from the test" (Hess & Bingham, 2000, p. 16). While outside experts concern themselves with test scores, this study demonstrated it is the teacher who

internalizes and stresses over the standardizing of the school day. Their answers showed it is not only what is missing from the school day, but it is the whole child that standardization forces the teacher to miss.

When schools begin to narrow curriculum, quality is narrowed as well. Infusing autonomy and creativity can be difficult when curriculum opportunities are narrowed and scripted manuals dictate teacher cadence. Mintrop (2008) discovered in a small-scale study that high performing schools were committed to a "highly focused coverage of standards-aligned materials within highly structured literacy and language arts programs taught in differentiated groups" (p. 25). His study found students did not receive any better instruction nor were students more engaged or more challenged with this implementation.

Emphasizing only the areas of reading, mathematics, and science will not produce well-rounded citizens who will be ready for the demands of the 21st century (Hess & Bingham, 2000). A recent IBM poll of 1,500 CEOs identified creativity as the number one "leadership competency" of the future (Bronson & Merryman, 2010, p. 45). Yet, children are not routinely allowed the time to explore and investigate. A lack of attention to the arts, history, and science strips richness from a child's education and possibly performance on tests. "Children expand their vocabulary and improve their reading skills when they learn history, science, and literature….The arts motivate are students love of learning" (Ravitch, 2010, p. 108). The focus group teachers implemented the artful learning method that sparked not only their children's desire to learn, but sustained their desire to teach, as so indicated by their responses. Using art to inspire critical thinking and generate curiosity in the general education classroom almost seems simplistic in

design yet, the research-supported benefits show “that students with high levels of arts participation did better than their peers on achievement and behavior measures” (www.aep-arts.org). Teachers who possess autonomy, can incorporate the arts into their narrowed curriculum classroom, which promote many of the skills that businesses now desire. Harman, a multi-millionaire CEO claimed he doesn’t find it all that necessary to hire MBAs. Harman stated, “Get me some poets as managers. Poets are our original systems thinkers. They contemplate the world in which we live and feel obliged to interpret and give expression to it in a way that makes the reader understand” (Pink, 2006, p. 143).

Standardization restricts schools from daily blocks of exploration and critical thinking on subjects. Infusing the arts and history can proliferate this thinking. Students gain a deep and fundamental understanding of curriculum content, incrementally, as “teachers assess and respond to their perceptions in real time, which is why curriculum needs to be contextualized and not standardized” (Brooks, Libresco, & Plonczak, 2007, p. 749).

Autonomy is a matter of degree. Yet, when teachers do not possess the autonomy to teach within their belief or value system, it can produce troubling consequences. When teachers are not allowed to self-legislate, it can withhold their professional development and willingness to improve their practice (Schinkel, 2010). With the continued reform efforts and incentives, such as Race to the Top (2009), efforts must be made to ensure that strategies to boost student achievement are not ushering quality teachers out of the classroom.

The Alliance for Excellent Education, a national policy and advocacy

organization, estimated that every school day, 1,000 teachers choose to leave the teaching profession for reasons not due to retirement. Half of all teachers entering the profession leave within their first five years of teaching and many of these are deemed the best and brightest in their area. Teachers reported too heavy a workload and lack of influence over school policy as common sources of dissatisfaction. Many teachers cited no hope in affecting change in their districts for their decision to leave the profession altogether (www.all4ed.org/files/archives/August 2005).

Autonomy and the ability to create are critical, if quality teachers are to stay in the profession. Troman, Jeffrey, and Raggl found "implementing creativity policies provided important contextual influencing factors on teacher commitment" (2007, p. 549). These were curriculum coverage and task completion, and providing psychic rewards of teaching. This finding was supported by Fischman, DiBara, and Gardner's claim "the rewards and results of creativity are often a key reason for staying committed to a difficult and challenging area of work" (2006, p. 389).

In fact, these schools searched for the most "direct connections among content, teaching, and testing" (Mintrop, 2008, p. 25). This focus left out teacher and student joy. This method does not celebrate intrinsic motivation for learning and teaching or instructional quality (Mintrop, 2008). Autonomy and creativity are written out of the equation and replaced with autocratic manuals, written specifically to align with standards.

"Standardization is the antithesis of personalization," claimed Wolk (2010, p. 18). This statement captures the reason for the teachers' apprehension regarding standards. Teaching is an extension of self; it relies on relationships with students to thrive. Sanders

and Rivers (1996) argued the single most important factor affecting student achievement is teachers, and the effects of teachers on student achievement are both additive and cumulative. Rimm-Kaufman's (2010) research found,

> Students who have close, positive, and supportive relationships with their teachers will attain higher levels of achievement than those students with more conflictual relationships. If a student feels a personal connection to a teacher, experiences frequent communication with a teacher, and receives guidance and praise from the teacher, then the student is likely to show more engagement in academics, display better classroom behavior, and achieve at higher levels academically. Positive teacher-student relationships draw students into the process of learning and promote their desire to learn given the content material of the class is engaging and age appropriate.

Examining both districts' curriculum time allotments charts, absent were blocks of time to transition from one activity to another, or opportunities for classroom meetings that build relationships. When the teaching day is narrowed down to scripts and timelines, the possibilities for teachers to engage in meaningful and authentic relationships are limited.

This leads to the focus groups' concern regarding possible, future standardization eroding the joy of teaching and to the lack of joy the survey group reported. Poetter (2006) researched the joy of teaching and found in particular, the joy of teaching embodied the acts of teaching and forging relationships with students. The focus group's most frequent category of "meeting the needs of the whole child" illustrated this point,

while the survey's category of "not meeting the needs of the whole child" resonated a poignant message.

Teachers must begin using their voice to speak for what they believe and know is right for their classrooms. They must speak with building administrators and district administrators. Conversations must be held with policy-makers, legislators, the Department of Education, and local school boards. All of these entities hold a responsibility for the welfare of the teachers. Teachers must be able to voice their helplessness and possibly even hopelessness, to produce meaningful conversations between administration and faculty. These conversations must be reciprocal. Staying connected with other teachers in the state through twitter or reading blogs will keep the discussion current. These "communities of congruence" (Palmer, 2010, p. 178), will aid to provide language that represents what teachers are feeling and experiencing. Keeping abreast of current literature regarding research in the area of standardization and the condition of the teacher can help all educators stay informed. Educational reform requires the authentic voice of educators, not "outside experts."

Recommendations for Further Study

Throughout the course of this study, questions and ideas regarding possible further studies arose. Can a teacher be effective when his or her philosophical beliefs are compromised? How do we measure that amount of compromise? With students' test scores? With a teacher's commitment to stay? With running a classroom that excites and feeds the students' spirits as well as minds?

Roth et al.'s (2007) exploration of autonomous teachers and how they affect their students offered a glimpse of how professional freedom or professional restrictions alter

students' learning styles. Roth et al.'s study revealed self-determined teaching leads to student self-determined learning, and this researcher believes the livelihood of students, presents the same urgency as does the condition of the teacher. How has the standardization of curriculum and instruction affected their learning and their attitude toward learning? Are students feeling the same stress as some teachers? These questions present opportunities for further investigation. As presented in this study, standardization does affect the teachers' ability to meet the needs of the whole child.

Delimitations of this study promoted further research on a larger scale. Specific choices made by this researcher defined the scope of this study. Would teachers feel the same about standardization if districts were undergoing similar, systematic changes? Is there a difference in teacher autonomy in smaller districts versus larger, metro districts? How is standardization viewed in smaller versus larger districts? Expanding the research to include more teachers in several districts would provide insight relevant to standardization and its affect on teacher autonomy and creativity from building to building or district to district perspective.

This researcher also wondered how the building or district leader could effect teachers' views toward the standardization of curriculum and instruction, and its affect on teacher autonomy and creativity. Do particular styles of leaders, perhaps servant leaders, foster a more mindful and compassionate environment, in regard to extending opportunities for teacher reflection? Does this aid in the betterment of aligning current reality with teachers' philosophy of teaching?

Summary

This study enriched the understanding of how standardization affects teachers' autonomy and creativity in the classroom. Relying on current research to guide this phenomenographical study, a survey was completed by teachers in a central-Iowa metro district, and a focus group was conducted in a neighboring district.

Results from this study indicated teacher autonomy and the freedom to be creative in their classrooms was adversely affected by the standardization of curriculum and instruction. Focus group teachers worked in a building that implemented the Leonard Bernstein Artful Learning Model of teaching, which is an arts-based school improvement model. These teachers possessed the autonomy to make curriculum changes to meet the needs of their students, were not held to a rigid pacing or assessment schedule, and every teacher in the group believed their current reality in the classroom aligned with their personal philosophy of teaching.

Overall, survey respondents with scripted language arts and mathematics programs, and recommended pacing and assessment guides viewed their professional autonomy and ability to be creative, as diminishing. The focus group unanimously voiced that meeting the needs of the whole child guided their philosophy and, in their district, they believed they were able to meet these needs. The survey group's overall responses indicated burgeoning teacher and student stress, and losing the ability to meet the needs of the whole child.

As extracted through their responses, the amount of joy or dissatisfaction that teachers were experiencing, due to the standardization of curriculum and instruction, led this researcher to conclude the condition of the teacher is a consequential concern that

requires the attention of administrators and educators. The current reform practices that are in place, stream-lining the curriculum, standardizing instruction and assessment, limit teacher involvement. “The assumption seems to be that teachers are a kind of civil servant, to be ‘trained’ by those who know better, and carry out the job as they are directed to do, to be assessed managerially” (Duckworth, 1984, p. 17).

We must continue to evaluate and insist on placing balanced and sensible autonomy back into the hands of teachers. A compromise must be reached on the autonomy continuum between unabashed freedom in the classroom and mandated conformity issued from district, state, and national officials. Standardization must be recognized as a method that does not consider how teachers or students learn, or feel about teaching or learning. "Bureaucratic solutions to problems of practice will always fail because effective teaching is not routine, students are not passive, and questions of practice are not simple, predictable, or standardized." (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 67). Teachers who are the experts in their field need a greater voice. Their voices should hold more power and their plight with standardization should be heard.

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Appendixes

A. IRB APPROVAL LETTER

B. SURVEY – LETTER OF INVITATION FOR PARTICIPATION

C. SURVEY

D. FOCUS GROUP – LETTER OF INVITATION FOR PARTICIPATION

E. FOCUS GROUP – LETTER OF CONSENT

F. FOCUS GROUP PROMPTS

APPENDIX A. IRB APPROVAL LETTER

Date: 4/26/2011

From: Judith Allen, IRB Chair
To: Angie Hood, School of Education
Re: **IRB Proposal #: 2010-11028**

Dear Angie,

Your expedited application for research titled "**Standardization and the affect on teacher autonomy and creativity**" has been reviewed and has received **approval**.

The approval period is from **4/26/2011 to 4/26/2012**.

If any changes are made to the protocol or if you plan to continue the study beyond the approval date, notify the IRB. Should you intend to continue your study beyond the approved time period, please submit an application to the IRB no later than **one month before the expiration date** to ensure compliance and continued data collection. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions.

Judith Allen
Drake IRB Chair 2009-11

APPENDIX B. SURVEY – LETTER OF INVITATION FOR PARTICIPATION

April 27, 2011

Dear Educator,

I am a Drake Ed.D. Educational Leadership candidate and I am respectfully inviting you to participate in a research project regarding the increasing standardization of the school day and how it affects teacher autonomy and creativity. In a few days you will receive through inner-campus mail a survey entitled, "**Standardization and Teacher Autonomy and Creativity**". This survey will take about 10 minutes to complete and is comprised of five open-ended prompts.

Please note your participation is voluntary and may be discontinued at any time during the process. Please know your participation and identity will remain confidential as I must adhere to strict research guidelines. Your name and school building will not be used in connection with the data. All completed surveys will be kept at my home office and analyzed by me. Since this research is qualitative, I will be reading the surveys for common themes and using the collective responses to craft future, focus group questions. It is possible that some responses will be anonymously quoted in my dissertation. Please note that your name is not required on the completed survey and you will return the survey to my home address, using the provided self-addressed stamped envelope.

Thank you for your consideration regarding participating in this study. Again, you will be receiving the survey with more detailed information in a few days. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me. This project was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Drake University on April 26, 2011. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Drake University IRB via email at irb@drake.edu and by phone at 515.***.****.

With appreciation,

Angie Hood
Ed.D. Educational Leadership Student
Drake University

APPENDIX C. SURVEY

Educators,

Please complete the following survey and return to me in the provided, self-addressed stamped envelope. Your responses may be hand-written but you may also use a word processor for legibility. Again, I appreciate your willingness to help me and provide honest responses.

I have provided definitions for key words to eliminate misunderstandings.

Standards: The skills and knowledge that students should possess at specific grade-levels and are utilized from preschool to twelfth grade.

Standardization: Uniformity, conformity, specificity; to cause to conform to a standard. Conformity to district mandates and state standards, curriculum pacing, and sequencing.

Teacher Autonomy: Ideas of professional freedom; ability to make self-directed decisions.

Creativity: The ability to invent, experiment, grow, take risks, and make mistakes.

Again, thank you for your help.

Sincerely,

Angie Hood
Ed.D. Educational Leadership Student
Drake University

Standardization and Teacher Autonomy and Creativity Survey

Describe teacher autonomy and creativity in regard to your daily teaching.

How have the standards and the core curriculum benefited you and your students? How have they limited you and your students?

Explain how standardization has affected and changed your teaching.

Who developed or built your daily schedule? What was your amount of input into the daily schedule?

Does your current reality of teaching align with your personal philosophy of teaching? Please explain.

APPENDIX D. FOCUS GROUP – LETTER OF INVITATION FOR PARTICIPATION

May 11, 2011

Dear Teacher,

I am a Drake Ed.D. Educational Leadership student and am respectfully requesting your voluntary participation in a research study. I will be conducting a focus group at ******* on Thursday, May 19th, from 8:15 – 8:45 a.m., regarding the increasing standardization of the school day and how it affects teacher autonomy and creativity.

Please note your participation is voluntary and may be discontinued at any time in the process. Please know your participation and identity will remain confidential as I must adhere to strict research guidelines. Your name and/or school building will not be used in connection with the data. Although involvement in this group does not pose major risks, please note the discussions might produce strong feelings and the possibility of differing opinions among the participants could elicit some emotional stress. The anticipated 30-minute meeting will be held before school in your media center.

The focus group conversation would be audibly recorded. Your identity will remain confidential and I will be the only person to listen to the recordings. For transcribing purposes, each participant will be identified with a number and throughout the data analysis process will be referred to as the number. After the transcription is complete, the audio files will be destroyed. Teachers will be duly informed regarding their rights as a research participant and will sign a consent form, which will further explain the process of member checking and how I will maintain confidentiality and the data from our focus group.

Since 2007, Iowa has moved from employing local control to developing state standards, and as of July 29, 2010, adopting national standards, otherwise referred to as the Common Core. This study will examine the results of the standards, an increasing standardization of our school curriculum and instruction and how these changes have affected the classroom teacher's autonomy and creativity.

I am hoping you will consider joining me for a conversation regarding the increasing standardization of curriculum and instruction and how it affects teacher autonomy and creativity. If you have any questions or concerns regarding the focus group and/or confidentiality issues, please feel free to contact me. Thank you.

With appreciation,

Angie Hood
Ed.D. Educational Leadership Student
Drake University

APPENDIX E. FOCUS GROUP LETTER OF CONSENT

May 31, 2011

Dear Educator,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the focus group. The purpose of this group is to research and gain an understanding of how the increasing standardization of the school day affects teacher autonomy and creativity.

I will be conducting focus groups at two elementary schools in the West Des Moines district and am anticipating 5-6 participants per group. The amount of contact time will be approximately 30 minutes and will be held before school.

Although involvement in this group does not pose major risks, please note the discussions might produce strong feelings and the possibility of differing opinions among the participants could elicit some emotional stress. To help minimize possible emotional stress, it is asked that all participants agree to keep the conversation confidential and acknowledge they should not hold discussions with others who are not directly involved in the focus group. The focus group conversation will be audibly recorded. Your identity will remain confidential and I will be the only person to listen to the recordings. For transcribing purposes, each participant will be identified with a number and throughout the data analysis process will be referred to as the number. After the transcription is complete, the audio files will be destroyed. Potential benefits of this focus group include access to the information obtained regarding how others view their school day and conclusions regarding what this means in terms of the condition of the teaching profession. Please note your participation is voluntary and may be discontinued at any time in the process. Please know your participation and identity will remain confidential as I must adhere to strict research guidelines. Your name and/or school building will not be used in connection with the data. It is possible that some responses will be anonymously quoted in my dissertation. If you are directly quoted or paraphrased, I will conduct a member check with you; I will contact you before using the data to ensure an accurate quote and/or proper interpretation of the data. The data will remain confidential and will be kept by me for 2-3 years with the possibility of being used for article publication and/or presentations.

If at any time you have questions or concerns regarding your participation or the research, please feel free to contact me. You can reach me via phone at 515.402.2089 or via email at tlhood@q.com. This project was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Drake University on April 26, 2011. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Drake University IRB via email at irb@drake.edu and by phone at 515.***.****.

I agree to participate in the focus group according to the above terms.

_____ _____

Participant Signature Date

I do grant permission to be directly quoted in the study. Initial_____

I do not grant permission to be directly quoted in the study. Initial_____

Researcher: Angie Hood; (phone numbers were provided)

APPENDIX F. FOCUS GROUP PROMPTS

Standardization and Teacher Autonomy and Creativity
Focus Group Prompts

Describe teacher autonomy and creativity in regard to your daily teaching.

How have the standards and the core curriculum benefited you and your students? How have they limited you and your students?

Explain how standardization has affected and changed your teaching.

Who developed or built your daily schedule? What was your amount of input into the daily schedule?

Does your current reality of teaching align with your personal philosophy of teaching? Please explain.